

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Cupid's Dart

David Nobbs

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About the Book

Alan and Ange are on a train, heading for London. Alan is a philosophy lecturer, still a virgin at fifty-five; Ange a twenty-something, horoscope-reading, darts groupie. They certainly don't expect their first casual meeting to lead to anything, but it does. Seizing the day, as they pull into Euston station, Alan asks Ange out to dinner and so begins the unlikeliest of liaisons. As they get to know each other, they are initiated into each other's worlds. From the claustrophobic confines of an Oxford College to the heady excitement of a big dart's match; from *Liebfraumilch* to Wittgenstein and everything in between. They even travel to Rome seeing many wonderful things as Alan learns to live for the moment and Ange to appreciate the finer things in life.

But can they survive their differences in age and background? Are Alan's feelings the stuff of obsession and infatuation or is this true love? And what sort of philosopher is he if he cannot define and understand love?

Told through the voice of Alan, this touching and hilarious story is much more than a tale about an unlikely couple. Ultimately, it is a story about the nature of love.

About the Author

David Nobbs was born in Kent. After university, he entered the army, then tried his hand at journalism and advertising before becoming a writer. A distinguished novelist and comedy writer, he lives near Harrogate with his wife Susan.

Also by David Nobbs

FICTION

The Itinerant Lodger
A Piece of the Sky is Missing
Ostrich Country
The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin
The Return of Reginald Perrin
The Better World of Reginald Perrin
Second From Last in the Sack Race
A Bit of a Do
Pratt of the Argus
Fair Do's
The Cucumber Man
The Legacy of Reginald Perrin
Going Gently
Sex and Other Changes
Pratt à Manger

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I Didn't Get Where I Am Today

Cupid's Dart

David Nobbs



arrow books

For Leslie Ash

Acknowledgements

The idea for this book started life as a play for Yorkshire Television, transmitted in 1981 in a series called 'Plays for Pleasure'. Would that such a series title could happen today.

I received at least twice as many fan letters for this play as for any other single piece of television. It was brilliantly acted and directed, and stayed with me, demanding eventually to be updated, lengthened and deepened.

I have dedicated this book to Leslie Ash, because she was tremendous, in her first television role, as the Ange character, then called Ros, and because she has been such a terrible victim of the hospital superbug and has done so much to try to puncture the complacency in which this dreadful disease is shrouded.

But I must also mention the late Robin Bailey as Alan; Marjorie Bland, wonderfully awful as Jane; and Julian Holloway, the very essence of a complacent don as Lawrence. Their sparkling performances all helped to inspire me to write this book.

Thanks also to David Cunliffe, the director, and Pat Sandys, the producer, who served me so well in those magical days when one-off plays still mattered.

The older I get, the more I realise how much I need the support of others. I owe much to my wife, Susan; my agents, Jonathan Clowes and Ann Evans; and my editors, Susan Sandon and Georgina Hawtrey-Woore.

ONE

I TRAVELLED ON the same train today, exactly a year after our first meeting. A year! Was it really only a year ago? Has only a fifty-sixth of my life passed since that day which changed everything? It seems a lifetime ago, and yet it also seems like yesterday. I mentioned that to Lawrence. ‘That’s women for you,’ he said. ‘That’s what they do to you.’ I don’t think he likes women – but then, if I was married to Jane, I don’t think I would like women either.

I say ‘the same train’. I mean, of course, the train that left Manchester and was due at London Euston at the same time on the same day as that train a year ago. It wasn’t the same train at all. Well, it might have been, I didn’t check the carriage numbers or the name on the engine, such trivia have never interested me, but I think it extremely unlikely. Anyway, I don’t give a damn about these linguistic minutiae. Not any more. Not after her.

This time two people sat at the other side of the table from me. They were fat and boring and I hated them. I wanted the seat to remain empty at least until Stoke, so that . . . what? She would get on again? Ridiculous. This was life, not a fantasy. Some other woman would get on, lovely, sexy, available, and *we* would get talking and I would invite *her* to a posh restaurant? What rot.

For fourteen years I had been busy writing my great book, the book that would make my reputation. I had written 527 pages of ‘Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein’, and I still hadn’t got further than Nietzsche. Now I have decided to put the project aside, until I have written *this* book, my book about her. I’m calling it ‘Cupid’s Dart’. I am no longer frightened of the obvious.

As the train pulled slowly out of Stoke’s unlovely station, I found myself looking out of the window, observing every detail. A year ago I had also been looking out of the window as the train rattled through the Midlands, but I had been seeing nothing except my thoughts. She had pointed that out to me. ‘You look, but you don’t see nothink,’ she had said. Well, there’s no point in my hiding from you that grammar was not her strong point.

So now I looked as I thought that she would have looked. I saw some small factories with ugly corrugated roofs, enough waste ground to solve all the area's housing problems, and one lone brick kiln, a pathetic reminder of the golden age of the decrepit pottery towns. She would have felt sorry for that sad, isolated kiln, and now I found myself feeling sorry for it. Yes, I was anthropomorphising about a kiln. How I had changed. How I would have despised this me a year ago.

She would have laughed at me if she had known what I was thinking now. Not cruelly, though. Her laugh was never cruel.

I had a sudden fear that tears would spring to my eyes. That would never do. I said that it had been a day that changed everything. If I gave way to tears now, it would have changed nothing. If I was not different now, better now, braver now, then it had all been a waste of time. That would mean that Lawrence had been right. Just for a moment I saw Jane's cool, laser smile. 'We did warn you, Alan.' I owed it to myself not to allow Jane any kind of victory. I owed it to myself not to cry. I hadn't come on this train to wallow in self-pity.

I looked out at the water meadows, beside the uninspiring Trent. Rivers could inspire. Danube, Tigris, Orinoco. Amazon, Yangtze, Mississippi. These were names that quickened the blood. Trent did not.

A brightly painted narrow boat was chugging along an absurdly small canal at the side of the train. A middle-aged man stood at the helm. He was wearing a yachting cap and in his body there was the tension and self-importance of a man steering an oil tanker through treacherous waters. A middle-aged woman brought him a cup of tea. He planted a middle-aged kiss on her forehead. I waved at them. I, Alan Calcutt, Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford, who had spent fourteen years of my life writing 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein', had waved from a train to a middle-aged couple on a boat. Yes, I had changed.

I smiled at the fat couple. Now that we had passed Stoke, I didn't need to hate them any more. They didn't smile back. Fuck you, I thought. Go and drown in your sad obesity. I had been thinking that perhaps I shouldn't mention that they were fat – that it was an unacceptable detail in these days of political correctness – but it was true, they were, and there is not much point in telling you my story if I'm not truthful. Besides, they were sitting where she had

sat, and they were forfeiting any sympathy I might have felt by their constant munching of anything that crunched – crisps, chocolate bars, munch, munch, munch, crunch, crunch, crunch, these mouths were made for eating and not for talking: they barely said a word.

A heron flapped slowly over the sodden fields. It was raining, just as it had rained a year ago. I thought that I had never seen a heron before. I mean, herons had been in my field of vision, from time to time, but I hadn't really noticed them. How long and thin they were, and how inelegant when they flew. They were absurd. Life was absurd. If only I had realised that long, long ago, how different my life would have been.

But if my life had been different I wouldn't have met her, and I was delighted that I had met her, so it was impossible for me to wish that anything in my life had been different, so it was a blessing that I hadn't realised sooner how absurd life was.

The overweight couple were looking at me, and it occurred to me that they were wondering what I was thinking, and it pleased me that they could have no possible concept of what I was thinking, just as I could have no concept of what they were thinking – but then the man helped me. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'I could murder a cup of tea.'

We passed the cooling towers of Rugby. We rattled through Rugby. I wondered what she was doing at that moment. I recalled my very last words to her, and I found . . . yes, I did, I really did . . . that I had the strength in me to live by those words.

I smiled ruefully to myself at the thought of that sad, virginal, pedantic anorak who had travelled this route exactly a year ago . . . well, not exactly a year ago, this train was going to be late, it kept slowing down . . . who had travelled this route exactly a year and seventeen minutes ago. I laughed at this caricature of my pedantry, laughed out loud, which made my travelling companions uneasy, which gave me a little stab of wicked satisfaction.

I smiled at them. I wondered how they had managed to find a bed strong enough to stand up to their ungainly couplings, but I didn't say anything about that, of course.

I said, 'I wouldn't have laughed like that a year ago, before I'd met her. I've a lot to thank her for. That's why I've made this journey really.'

They looked frightened. There were forty-five miles to go before

we reached London, and they were beginning to think I was unhinged, and they were stuck with me on that crowded train.

I thought of the waiter in the snobby French restaurant, that first night, and I leant across the table towards them.

‘I’m out on parole,’ I said, ‘but I have to report in every week.’

They retreated into their blubber in horror. How she would have laughed.

It made me sad to think of how she would have laughed.

TWO

YOUNG WOMEN HAD spoken to me before, of course. They had said, 'Can I help you, sir?' and, all too frequently, 'There you go', and recently, to my chagrin, a couple of times, 'Would you like this seat?' But I couldn't remember any young woman speaking to me as if she was interested in me. Not even Rachel, in all the seventeen months of our sterile and abortive relationship.

This young woman got on the train at Stoke-on-Trent, and walked slowly down the carriage, looking for a seat. The train was rather full, but I had a table to myself. There is . . . or was . . . something about me that deterred other travellers. The seats near me were always the last to go. That pleased me, but it also hurt me somewhat. I am more sensitive than people imagine.

She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, on which was the legend, 'Townsend Tissues', below which was a thoroughly off-putting picture of a large man with a beer belly sneezing into a tissue.

She was carrying an overnight bag, and she gave me a little smile as quick as a snake's tongue.

Her first remark didn't really count. It was, 'Is anybody sitting there?'

I looked across the small table, on which some notes for my lecture were strewn, and said, 'I have an uninterrupted view of the frankly rather dull upholstery. I think I can safely deduce, therefore, that nobody is sitting there.'

I was appalled by my pedantry. What on earth had possessed me? But it seemed to wash over her.

'Thanks,' she said.

She reached up to put her bag on the rack. As she did so she revealed a few inches of smooth young flesh below her T-shirt. The top of a tattoo peeped shyly out of her jeans, like a cautious cat.

There was a jolt as the train started abruptly. She sat down more quickly than she had intended, and gave another quick little smile, but this one had elements of a grimace in it. I found myself smiling back, which surprised me. I'd never been known for smiling.

‘There’s no risk of anybody ever calling you Smiler Calcutt, is there?’ Rachel had once said. Or, more probably, at least twice. Her dry comments on my failings used to come round on a fairly short loop.

The train slid slowly out of Stoke’s suitably sombre station. The young woman . . . girl? (how should I think of her? What age was she? Twenty-five? I had so little experience of judging ages, especially young women’s ages) looked out of the window. I found myself doing the same, but I saw nothing, and I soon went back to my notes. I found that I could no longer concentrate. I was too aware of her.

She sighed, stood up, lifted her bag off the rack, opened it, removed a magazine from it, closed it, and put it back on the rack.

‘A disorganised mind,’ I thought dismissively, my first brief interest fading.

She began to read her magazine. The train gathered speed. I tried to gather my thoughts. I couldn’t. It wasn’t going well. It didn’t really matter, there were several weeks to go before the lecture, but it made me feel uneasy. I was, in truth, just beginning to be gripped by a still distant fear – that, having been given my great chance to show the academic world something of my innate brilliance, I would discover that I had nothing to say.

I became aware that she had looked up and was studying me. This was extraordinary – extraordinary that she should be studying me, and extraordinary that I should sense it. I had never been intuitive.

I looked up too and met her eye. That also surprised me. Why on earth should I have looked up? Why on earth should I be interested in her, once it was established that she had a disorganised mind?

That was when she came out with it, her question, her three monosyllabic words, which she would surely not have bothered to say if she hadn’t been at least slightly interested in me.

‘What are you?’

I was so surprised that for a moment even these three simple words made no sense, but I pulled myself together.

‘Ah!’ I said. ‘Good question. Funny you should ask me that. I’m a philosopher. I have devoted a lifetime to the painful process of finding it harder and harder to answer even such apparently simple questions as “What are you?”’

‘No,’ she said ‘I meant, “what sign?”’

‘Sorry?’

‘What star sign?’

‘Ah. Sorry. Er . . . Virgo.’

It was absurd, at my age, to feel ashamed of my star sign.

‘Virgo, eh? Oh yeah!’ She laughed. There was no cruelty in her laugh, and I noticed how good her teeth were. I’d have struggled to remember the colour of Rachel’s eyes, yet here I was noticing this young woman’s teeth!

‘But I’m on the cusp,’ I said, as though this made things better.

‘I’m on the pill,’ she said.

I smiled, carefully hiding my alarm at her directness.

‘Virgo!’ she repeated. ‘I ain’t never met many virgos. Bet it’s not very appropriate.’

‘Oh well . . .’ I let my remark hang in the air. I found that I didn’t want her to know how appropriate it was. It’s not exactly fashionable to be a virgin at fifty-five, in the twenty-first century, in sex-mad Britain. I wished that I was braver, less inhibited, less self-conscious. If only I could have said, quite casually, ‘It’s very appropriate actually’, the whole embarrassment would have been over in seconds. How complicated I make life for myself.

I hoped my face wasn’t revealing any of these thoughts to her.

I welcomed the little two-tone ring that precedes public address announcements the world over.

‘Good afternoon,’ said a slightly stilted male voice over the Tannoy. ‘My name is . . .’ There followed two words spoken so swiftly that nobody could catch them. People are so familiar with their own names that they see no need to speak them distinctly. ‘. . . and I am your customer services manager for this journey. For those customers who joined the train at Stoke, this is the 2.48 Virgin train for London Euston.’

‘Shouldn’t be on this train if it’s for virgins, eh?’ she said.

I feared for a moment that I would blush.

I felt that I must offer her some comment, to show that I was not being unfriendly or snobbish, but what could I possibly say to her? I couldn’t even make small talk to my fellow dons, people of the same sex and similar age. What could I say to a young girl at least thirty years my junior?

‘Probably not many people should be,’ I said, gamely entering into her little joke.

‘You can say that again,’ she said.

I didn't. I hadn't been too proud of saying it the first time. But I had to say something.

'So,' I asked, less than brilliantly, 'what are *you*? What sign?' I tried to look as though I cared.

'Guess.'

'Oh . . . well . . . it's not the kind of speculation I habitually . . . Aries?'

'No! Never in a million years.' She laughed. 'Leo.'

'Ah! Lion-hearted!'

'Of course. Sorry, I'm interrupting, ain't I?'

'No. No. Not really. The . . . er . . . the train of thought's been pretty well broken.'

'So, this philosophy,' she said, 'what's that all about when it's at home?' The impossibility of giving an adequate answer to anyone, let alone to her! Suddenly I felt extremely tired. I longed to close my eyes and have a Churchillian nap.

'Ah!' I said, playing for time. 'Now that's quite a question.' I have sometimes been told that when I discuss philosophy I can sound like a walking text book. As I spoke, I was painfully conscious of this, but I didn't know how to avoid it. 'Well . . . er . . . it's the search for truth and knowledge about the universe, human existence, perception and behaviour, pursued by means of reflection, reasoning and argument.'

'Bleedin' 'ell. So in the morning do you wake up and say to your wife, "Well, darlin', I s'pose it's time to get up and search for truth and knowledge about the universe and that?"'

'I . . . er . . . I don't have a wife.'

I said it casually, as a man might say, 'I don't have an umbrella', but for the first time in my life I felt that maybe it was a cause for regret. I also felt just a faint tingle of . . . yes . . . distant sexuality. Very distant still. I had . . . no, not an erection, but, if it doesn't sound too silly, an intimation of erections to come.

She went back to her magazine. I saw, on the front cover, details of the jewels within. 'Stretch marks of the Stars'. 'I'd never had an orgasm till I met my optician – he opened my eyes to sex'. 'Condors and condoms – where SA means Sex Appeal as well as South America'.

I looked away hurriedly, and began to study her face. I was vaguely aware how unusual it was for me to find a person more interesting than their reading matter.

She had dark, straight hair, pale blue eyes and high cheekbones. I particularly liked the curl of her nostrils. There was a small, slightly irregular indentation on her chin. It might have been a natural dimple or the result of a fall from a bicycle. I guessed, from my memory of her reaching up to the rack, that she was five foot three. There was a slightly cheeky air about her, an unselfconscious gamine confidence which lent charm to her immaturity.

She looked up, and I looked away, embarrassed to have been caught in such a detailed survey. Then I decided that looking away had emphasised my embarrassment, so I looked back at her just as she looked away because there was no point in looking at me if I wasn't looking at her.

I tried to work on my notes, but they seemed dreadfully dull.

I looked up again. I wanted to talk to her. But how? What about? I had no idea how to talk to young women. Or indeed, for that matter, old women. Or, come to think of it, young men. Or, actually, old men. In fact, to be honest, anybody.

Rachel's voice came to me, sharp and strident across two and a half decades, tart, icy, every other word a hand grenade, giving me advice before a party to which I hadn't wanted to go, when I'd moaned that I wouldn't have anything to say to her radiologist friends. 'Ask them about themselves, the way normal people do. Pretend to be interested.'

I could ask her what she'd been doing in Stoke-on-Trent. She might say that she'd been on the stopping train from Congleton, but in that case it shouldn't be beyond me to ask what she'd been doing in Congleton. Surely I could manage to sound as if I was interested?

And then a minor miracle occurred. I found that I really was interested.

'Er . . . what . . . er . . . were you doing in Stoke-on-Trent?'

'I'd been to the darts, hadn't I?' she replied.

'The . . . er . . . the darts?'

'The Extra Wet Strength Eliminator.'

'The what?!'

'Townsend Tissues sponsor this event, don't they? It's like a regional qualification for the national championships, know what I mean?'

I've noticed that people of a certain background invariably say 'Know what I mean?' when it's blindingly obvious what they mean – 'I find it difficult to get up in the mornings, know what I mean?' –

but on this occasion I had to admit to myself that I didn't know what this young lady meant. I hadn't a clue. There were worlds I knew nothing about.

'You . . . er . . . you like darts, do you?'

I don't think I have ever felt that my conversational efforts were quite as lame as they were on that train.

'You could say that,' she replied. 'I'm a darts groupie.'

'Sorry. What?'

'A darts groupie.'

'Ah. A darts what?'

'Groupie.'

'I see. Yes.' I didn't want to admit that I was lost, but I had to. 'Er . . . what is a darts groupie?'

'Well you know what a groupie is.'

'Yes. Yes. In the . . . rather special sense of . . . er . . . no.'

'Well a groupie follows pop groups around, mobs them and that, cuts off bits of their underpants, tries to sleep with them and stuff, know what I mean?'

'Yes. Yes. Yes.'

'Well I follow the top darts players around, don't I? I . . . er . . . I had quite a day yesterday.'

'Ah.' Come on, Alan. You can't leave it there. 'Er . . . in . . . er . . . in what way, quite a day?'

'I slept with Shanghai Sorensen.'

'Who?'

'Shanghai Sorensen. The Dashing Dane.'

'He sounds Chinese to me.'

'Not that Shanghai. Shanghai in darts.'

'Ah!'

I had tried to inject a knowing element into my 'Ah!' I had failed dismally.

'You do know what Shanghai is in darts, don't you?'

'Yes.' Oh come on, Alan. 'Once again in the . . . in the rather special sense of "No".'

'Bleedin' 'ell. And you said philosophy was knowledge and that.'

'Well, yes, broadly.'

'And you don't know what Shanghai is in darts. It's when you get a single, double and treble of the same number in three darts. Shanghai Sorensen, the Dashing Dane, does these demonstration matches where he bets on getting Shanghai. If he doesn't do it

fifteen times out of twenty the punters get their entrance money back. It's like his speciality. That's why they call him Shanghai. And I've slept with him.'

I had never met this girl before. I didn't think that I would ever meet her again. She meant nothing to me. I was more than somewhat surprised, therefore, to discover that I was rather upset that she had slept with Shanghai Sorensen, and that I resented Mr Sorensen for being such a dashing Dane.

'Well . . . jolly good,' I said absurdly.

'Twice. But yesterday was the last time. He says he can't never ever have sex with me again, cos I affected his adjustment, didn't I?'

'Sorry. His what?'

'His adjustment. Like if the first dart's in the five, which it almost never ever is with him, but if it was, he'd adjust to get the next dart in the treble twenty, right?'

'And after you'd slept with him, this process of adjustment proved ineffectual?'

'Yeah. He played last night. He was all over the place. He said to me, "I can't sleep with you no more. It was great sex, but it's fucking up my ranking position." He's the first Dane to get into the Top Ten, see.'

'Yes.' This was a lie. I didn't see. 'Well, how sad.' This was an even greater lie.

'I nicked one of his socks. His left sock. I'll never wash it. It'll go in my trophy cabinet, won't it?'

'Trophy cabinet?'

'Yeah. I got all sorts of things. I got a pair of underpants worn by Rob Crawley, the Chirpy Cockney Boy Wonder.'

'The Chirpy Cockney Boy Wonder?'

'That's what Jake Plimsoll calls him. He's this writer about darts. He comes up with these fantastic descriptions. He's a great writer.'

To my horror the words 'What, the equal of Tolstoy?' came into my head and approached my mouth. I kept my lips firmly clamped.

'I got an initialled handkerchief belonging to Tons Thomas.'

She blushed slightly as she mentioned his name.

'Tons Thomas?'

'The Mercurial Man Mountain from Merthyr.'

'Jake Plimsoll again?'

'Yeah. He's fantastic. But you must have heard of Tons Thomas?'

'Er, yes.' Why was I so pathetic? 'In the . . . erm . . . once again in

the . . . er . . . the rather special sense of . . . er . . . no.'

Silence fell between us, as if my not having heard of Tons Thomas had put me beyond the pale. To my astonishment, I found that I did not want to be beyond the pale.

She began to stare out of the window.

'I like looking out of the window,' she said. 'You see things. You see things you'll never see again. A man wheeling a bike. Never seen him before. Never see him again. I like that.'

I could think of no reply.

'Look at that!' she exclaimed.

I looked, though I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to be looking at. I saw a small field, roughly ploughed, very stony, with three burly men in it, and in the field there were posts with string running tautly between the them. The three men were looking at the train. The scene meant nothing to me.

'Marking it up for housing,' said the young woman. 'All be houses next year. Look at them lazy buggers, looking at a train as if they've never seen one before. Any excuse to stop working.'

'You notice a lot.'

'Just because I'm not a philosopher doesn't mean I'm thick.'

'Of course not.'

'My brother, he is thick. He had to have elocution lessons before he could say, "Come on you Spurs".'

She laughed. In her laugh there was joy at being alive. She had a wonderfully unaffected laugh. I suppose it was the first thing that . . . 'turned me on' is a bit strong . . . 'inspired an affectionate response' might be more the mark.

A little boy ran up the carriage gleefully, pursued by his angry, worried mother, who grabbed him and carried him screaming back to their seats. Absurd jingles rang out from two mobile phones.

'I bet you're an Alan,' said the young woman.

'Sorry?'

'I have this thing where I can tell people's names. I bet you're an Alan.'

'That's amazing!'

'You *are* an Alan?'

'Yes. Alan Calcutt.'

It warmed my heart to see her looking so thrilled at getting my name right, and this would have surprised me if I'd thought of it. My heart wasn't that easy to warm.

'I don't always get it right,' she admitted. 'Once I said Darren, and it really pissed him off. He was a Julian. What am I?'

'Sorry, what?'

'What's my name?'

'Oh. I don't know. No, I really . . . it's not the kind of speculation that I habitually . . . I'm really not very good at guessing. I think that too much reasoning has blunted my intuitive powers.' I looked out of the window again. I daresay I could have caught a glimpse of the three slender spires of Lichfield Cathedral, had I had eyes to see, but I was looking only for inspiration. 'Sandra?'

'No! Never in a million years!'

'Ros?'

'Not bad, I could have been, but no.'

'I give up.'

I could tell that she was disappointed in me. I wasn't a good sport. I never had been. Charades? Ugh. French cricket with people's odious offspring? No thank you.

'Ange'

'Ah. I wouldn't have got it.'

'I'm stopping you working, aren't I, Alan? You're busy.'

'No, Ange, not at all.' I was aware that I had said 'Ange' as if I could hardly believe it. 'I'm . . . I'm enjoying talking to you.'

'What's all this writing you're doing then? All them pages?'

'Ah. I've been chosen . . .' I tried not to show how proud I was. ' . . . to deliver this year's Ferdinand Brinsley Memorial Lecture.'

We sped through Tamworth Low Level. The station was a blur. Two men in red shirts wheeled a refreshment trolley past us. I said that we didn't want anything, without consulting Ange.

'I'd have liked a Coke,' she said.

'Oh. Sorry, Ange,' I said. 'A Coke, please,' I called out.

The trolley returned.

'It's Pepsi. Is that all right?'

'Is it, Ange?'

I kept repeating 'Ange' in the vain hope that I would get used to it.

'Yeah. Thanks.'

Believe it or not, but I had never bought a Coke or a Pepsi. This girl was already changing my life.

'So what's this thingummy whatsit lecture all about?' she asked.

'Ah. I . . . er . . . I . . . I should perhaps explain that the Ferdinand

Brinsley Memorial Lecture is not a strictly academic occasion. It's an opportunity to let our philosophical trousers down, as it . . . as it were. It's philosophy for an audience who are intelligent but not . . . not philosophers or even students of philosophy. It is, I suppose, a trifle . . .' I hesitated before the dreaded word, ' . . . populist. You've heard of the black holes of . . .'

'Calcutta,' she interrupted triumphantly.

'Einstein. I had thought of expanding a little talk I gave in the seventies, when there was still a bit of the maverick in me . . . my conceit was that there are social black holes, where time moves at a slower pace than in other places. Budleigh Salterton, Hove, ironically the whole of white South Africa. Time has moved on, however, and its . . . er . . . its humorous impact has dated. Then I . . . er . . . I hit upon a title which rather intrigued me: "The Social Politics of Incomprehension".'

'I don't understand.'

'Exactly. You weren't meant to. Well done.'

'Oh!' She was pleased.

'But that didn't work either. So then I toyed with the basic principles of logic, but I decided it was all too basic, and . . . er . . . at the moment I'm trying to develop something with . . . well, with the whole subject of chance. Can there be chance in life or is everything purposive? Do you know what teleology is?'

'Is it where you know what's on the telly without you have to look at the *TV Times*?'

'No. No! Though that's rather good. No, that is good. No, teleology is a philosophical term, for the belief that all phenomena, all natural processes, are directed towards a goal or have a purpose. A man drops a book out of a sixteenth-storey window. It hits, and kills, a man passing beneath.'

'That's horrible. Poor man.'

'No, no. It's hypothetical. There is no man. There is no book. But if there was . . . if there was . . . could we say that if the man dropped the book deliberately, he caused the other man's death? Let's assume that he dropped the book deliberately, but he had no intention of killing anybody. But he did kill somebody. Did he cause that man's death or was it an accident? Was he responsible for that man's death? And, if he had dropped the book accidentally, was he still responsible? And if he dropped the book accidentally, and killed the man by malign ill-chance, is it possible that, although this

was a chance event from his point of view, there is another, greater system of causation within which he had to drop the book, whether or not he intended to? Supposing a man dropped a book deliberately to land on someone's head and kill him, but he mistimed it and killed someone else. You can see that the moral aspects are deeply complex.'

I paused, wondering what she had made of it all. She appeared to be staring out of the window. I hoped that this was to help her concentrate better on what I was driving at. My hopes were dashed.

'I wonder if birds are ever frightened of heights,' she said.

'Sorry?'

'All them birds up there. I was just thinking, it'd be a right old do if one of them was afraid of heights. Like a lark for instance. Fuck up his life a bit, wouldn't it? The old singing and that. Know what I mean?'

'Extraordinary thought. Fascinating. You know, one of the problems of being clever, it seems to me, is that one ceases to have extraordinary thoughts. One's thoughts are too conditioned by one's knowledge of all the thoughts that have gone before.'

I realised my error immediately, and I blushed. This was my second blush in less than an hour. I hate blushing. Thank goodness nobody from the department was there to see it.

She was on to it like a flash, of course. 'Are you saying I'm not clever? You *do* think I'm thick.'

'No. No!'

'I wouldn't blame you. I didn't listen to all that you were saying about chance, did I? I must be a disappointment to you.'

'Not at all. To be disappointed one has to have had hopes. I have no hopes.'

I didn't mean it to sound so abrupt. I could tell that it flattened her. It was rude, it was thoughtless, and it wasn't even true. I couldn't believe it. It wasn't true. I did have hopes. I didn't know what they were yet, but I knew that I had them.

'I wonder what cows think about.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Cows. What do they think a train is? All them black and white jobs in that field. What does a train mean to them? Fuck all, probably. You're annoyed.'

'No! Why should I be annoyed?'

'Because you want to talk about philosophy and all I do is rabbit

about cows. Hey, that's not bad, is it? Rabbit about cows. Sorry.'

'No, no, no. You aren't a student. You don't have to listen to me. No, if I looked annoyed, it was because you used that word. The f word.'

'Everybody uses it these days.'

'Exactly, and that's why I don't like it. It's so boring. So lazy. I'm sorry. It's not for me to tell you not to use it, but it's rather spoiling our conversation.'

I could see her brain registering the fact that if a conversation was capable of being spoilt, there must be something in it that was worth not spoiling. It was her turn to blush slightly.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I'll try not to say it. Go on. Tell me some more about . . . what was it . . . chance?'

'Right. Well, let's bring it back to this train. I . . . er . . . I'm interested in . . . in a humorous way, because the Ferdinand Brinsley is basically a light-hearted occasion . . . in the mathematics of chance. How many people are there in this carriage? Fifty? Sixty? If you had asked all sixty, a year ago today, if they would be on this train today, I'm sure that many of them would have scoffed at the possibility.'

'That baby over there wasn't even f . . . wasn't even born.'

'Well, exactly. Good point. Good point, Ange.'

Don't overdo it, Alan. It's patronising.

'I don't think he's three months old. What were the chances of his parents having a fuck that very night . . . oops, sorry . . .'

'No, I don't mind it in that context, it's factual. I only object to it as a meaningless adjective.'

'Oh. Well, I mean you don't fuck every night do you? Well, parents don't . . . and I mean, you don't conceive anything like every time, do you?'

'No. Quite. What were the chances a year ago of you being on this train?'

'Practically nil, cos I had a job last year, till that bitch on Reception started picking on me.'

'Well there you are.' I was astounded to find myself feeling grateful to that bitch on Reception. If she hadn't picked on her, Ange wouldn't have been on the train. Oh, what a lovely bitch. I would quite like to find out where she was on Reception and go and thank her one day for being such a bitch. 'And to calculate the actual odds of everybody being on this train you would have to

multiply the odds in every particular case. If your chances were a hundred to one and mine were a hundred to one then the chances of both of us being on the train are ten thousand to one before we bring in anybody else, yet here we all are and it doesn't seem remotely extraordinary.'

'If it is ten thousand to one, we're lucky,' she said.

'Lucky?'

'I've enjoyed talking to you.'

She had echoed my thoughts! I felt curiously moved, and rather embarrassed. Somewhat out of desperation, I offered her a banana which I happened to have in my briefcase. I haven't graduated to a laptop.

'You've only got one,' she protested.

'I'd like you to have it.'

'Well, ta. Thanks.'

She peeled the banana and raised it towards me.

'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

Silence fell loudly between us. She returned to her magazine, I to my notes, but the words were dancing. They didn't make sense. We must have remained silent for the best part of half an hour, and I realised that after fifty-five years of living I had insufficient social skills to be able to break that silence. Thank goodness she did.

'Virgo.'

'Yes.'

She laughed, and began to read from the magazine.

"A chance encounter with an interesting man could produce far reaching results." It says "man" cos it's a women's magazine so it's aimed at women, but in your case it would be an interesting woman, cos you're a man. Unless you're gay, which I don't think you are cos I can always spot them. Like down the Black Bull I knew Colin Parsley's so-called wife was a bloke before anybody. Hey, do you think I could be the interesting woman? Do you think I could produce far reaching results?' She began to read again. "You must be quick off the mark or the opportunity will slip by. A generous impulse could have amazing results."

We were passing through Watford Junction.

"A generous impulse",' repeated Ange. 'That could be the Pepsi you bought me.'

'Hardly. You had to twist my arm.'

‘The banana, then. You gave me your only one.’

‘No. I’m afraid there was nothing generous about that. I hate bananas. No, I never have generous impulses, I’m never quick off the mark, and opportunities always pass me by.’

‘Oh well.’

The train was slowing down. Soon we would be at Euston. I was amazed to discover that I didn’t want Ange to disappear from my life. I wanted to see her again. I must see her again.

This was absurd. We had nothing in common.

I tried to ask her out, but the words froze in my mouth. Instead, I heard myself say, ‘What does your horoscope say?’

“‘You’re in a bit of a rut, but you don’t know it yet. You are not always able to distinguish between fantasy and real life. Now is a good time to make the distinction, especially early in the month. If you are made a surprising offer, you should accept it.’”

We were overtaking a tube train. It looked small and bald and vulnerable outside its tunnel, like a large slug crossing a patio towards the succulent shelter of distant lettuces.

I didn’t believe a word of it, but I had to admit that the magazine was giving me cue after cue. Surely even I could respond to one of them?

Speak now, man, or your life will continue to be as it has been, and that suddenly seems intolerable.

‘Ange?’ I began hoarsely. I wish I could pretend that I hadn’t sounded so hoarse and pathetic. ‘Ange . . . will you . . . er . . . will you . . .’ I cleared my throat, ‘. . . will you have dinner with me tonight?’

THREE

‘SO, WHERE ARE we going to eat then?’ she asked. ‘I mean, I don’t know restaurants, do I?’

We were standing on the platform at Euston Station. All the other passengers were scurrying past us, busy ants with ordered, urgent lives.

I was astonished that she had accepted my invitation. I think she was too. I wanted to get it all fixed up before she changed her mind. Hurriedly, I suggested L’Escargot Bleu. It was the only London restaurant I could think of.

She suggested that I phoned them to make sure that they had a vacancy. I was forced to reveal that I didn’t have a mobile phone. She shook her lovely head – its loveliness shone out in the functional sobriety of Euston – in sadness and shock, as if I had admitted that I had no testicles. She used her mobile to find the number of the restaurant, and I booked a table for eight o’clock. I found it ominous that there should be a vacancy at the time I suggested. Probably the restaurant had gone into terminal decline. I do have a pessimistic streak.

I wondered whether to kiss her goodbye. I felt frozen in ineptitude. She gave me a very quick little kiss on the cheek, said, ‘See you later’, and strode off. I watched her till she disappeared down the steps towards the underground.

I rubbed my cheek disbelievingly. A loudspeaker announced that the train to Glasgow was ready for boarding, and I fought off an irrational desire to get on to it and go far, far away.

I walked towards the station concourse. It was crowded with anxious passengers. People were hurrying in all directions. Only I didn’t know what to do next. I was, after all, on my way home to Oxford. Had I time to go back home, bath, change, and catch a train back to Paddington? I didn’t think so. I needed to find an hotel.

On the very rare occasions when I need to spend a night in London I use one of the cheap, impersonal hotels that abound in the vicinity of the Euston Road. I use the word ‘cheap’ in a specialised

sense, meaning 'not as expensive as other hotels' – £79 for a box in an hotel without one touch of charm is not cheap. My friend Ashley Coldthrop would think it cheap. He works in the City. I do not. I am an academic. Don't start me off on the values of our society.

Actually, I have always liked impersonal chain hotels. I want the minimum of contact with other people, but I don't want to be the only person breakfasting on my own. With the protection of the loneliness and mediocrity all around me, I can melt into the crowd.

As I walked into the foyer of the nearest such hotel, I suddenly found myself back at school with Ashley. If I get eight sprouts on my plate, I will pass my exams in eight subjects. If there is a vacancy in this hotel tonight, she will turn up tonight. If there isn't, she won't.

There was a vacancy. The moment I discovered that, my simplistic little fantasy of cause and effect disintegrated. I deserved that. How could I, a mature and reasonably successful philosophy don, even have attempted to connect two such separate events?

I paid my bill in advance, as demanded. We are not talking about a civilised environment here. I carried my bag and briefcase over to the lift. I rode up in the lift, which had been built by Blackstone of Preston. I arrived safely. Good old Blackstone.

At the exit from the lift there were two arrows, one pointing left to Rooms 301–347, the other pointing right towards Rooms 348–393. This was not an hotel that even its brochure could describe as intimate.

I had been given room 393. Does that surprise you? Have you not formed a picture of a man who is always given the room furthest from the lift? This one will do. He won't cause trouble. He won't make a fuss. We'll give him 393.

I cannot describe the long walk from the lift to Room 393 as stimulating. It involved traversing two sides of the square building, along carpets designed not to show marks where people had thrown up on them, past forty-five identical doors to a forty-sixth, past bleak walls broken up only by eight sad paintings. In this dark, claustrophobic world, only the red fire extinguishers shone.

Nevertheless, just as I passed Room 378, my bag getting heavier by the second, I stopped dramatically, struck by a thought. If things went well this evening, I might be bringing her back here, to this. Oh God.

I tried to dismiss this wonderful, terrible thought. I couldn't

possibly get that far. I had never got that far. Even with Rachel I hadn't got that far. *Especially* with Rachel I hadn't got that far. I would have had more chance of breaking into Fort Knox than of having intercourse with Rachel. I thought her knickers were welded on to her body.

I couldn't understand why I had suddenly begun thinking of Rachel after thirty years. I think now, looking back on it, that it was because Ange's loveliness brought home to me how stupid I had been to waste seventeen months of my young life in such a futile and half-hearted pursuit of an utterly sexless young woman.

I searched in my pockets for my silly little plastic room key. At last I found it. If, when I slid it into the narrow slot provided, a green light flashed briefly and the door of my room opened to reveal the ghastly sterility within, then she would come back with me that night. If, as usually happened, a red light flashed and I had to return to Reception to get the wretched thing reprogrammed, she wouldn't come.

A green light flashed, immediately signifying nothing, but I smiled wryly as I removed the plastic from the slot, wondering if anyone had ever used one of those bloody little keys as a phallic symbol before.

I dumped my bag on the bed. The mattress sagged and creaked. This was a bed made for sciatica, not sex.

I went into the cramped, claustrophobic bathroom. It had two cracked tiles and a bath designed for midgets. I lifted the lavatory seat, noting that it was loose, and did what had to be done. As I washed my hands – I'm fanatical about washing my hands, don't like touching money without washing them afterwards – I looked in the mirror, and saw a neglected face.

My eyebrows had been left to their own devices for far too long. My hair had never been cut stylishly. For twenty years I had gone to the same barber because he was cheap and because he didn't make conversation. My abhorrence of small talk was due entirely to the vast areas of ignorance that it exposed. Football, cricket, our dreary politicians, motor cars, pubs, foreign holiday destinations, pop music, theatre, cinema, television, animal life, bird life, insect life, gardens, DIY – you name it, I didn't know anything about it.

I recalled with horror the one time when, due to circumstances beyond my control, I found my hair being cut by a trendy young man, who said to me, 'Are we planning anything interesting today,

sir?' I had only just resisted an absurd temptation to shock him by saying 'Yes, I'm going home to slash my wrists in the bath.' There hadn't been any point. He wouldn't have cared, might even have tried to sell me a razor.

Why did I think of that now? Because I was wondering what on earth I could possibly talk to Ange about. Because I was in a complete and utter panic. What on earth had possessed me to ask her out to dinner? Why on earth had I chosen, of all places, L'Escargot Bleu?

Because it was the only London restaurant I had been to in the last two years. Ashley Coldthrop had taken me there. He was the only friend I still had from my school days. All my other real friendships, all six of them, had been made at Oxford. Once every two years Ashley took me out to dinner in London. Once every two years I took him out more modestly in Oxford. His wife didn't come. It worked better that way.

I was a man so socially inept in the presence of women that my evenings with my oldest friend went better when his wife was not present. What on earth was I doing asking a darts groupie out to dinner?

Darts. That was what we would talk about. Avoid Wittgenstein, concentrate on darts, and everything would be all right. In my adolescent days, my desperate days of puberty, paralysis and pimples, I had saved my pocket money for a correspondence course on conversation! I'd soon given it up, it depressed me so much, but the one thing I remembered – I'd even tried it at the time – was to talk about what the other person is interested in. It hadn't worked very well. I would ask a question and then forget to listen to the reply, or hear half of it but miss vital clues, which would rapidly become apparent, so that I ended up looking stupid. I remember overhearing one of Rachel's radiologist friends saying, in a pub in Pangbourne, 'He's so clever, how can he always be so dim?'

I felt better, after that, for at least a minute or two. I examined my face again, wondering if she could possibly find it kissable. Well, it wasn't grotesque, just weary, just lived in. The cheeks were sunken; I had the pallor of celibacy upon me; I should have had my teeth whitened; but no, I wasn't too awful, and if I'd looked after myself I might even have seemed moderately attractive.

Then I went back into my room and unzipped my bag. Suddenly it dawned on me that I had nothing to unpack. I had no spare

clothes. I hadn't expected to stay away for an extra day. I had never stayed away for an extra day in my life. I had no spare shirt, no clean socks. My underpants were grey with age – rather like me, in fact, although I had always thought that it was their dogs rather than their underpants that owners came to resemble.

I took a taxi to Regent Street, and bought a complete set of matching clothes in a suitably old-fashioned shop. It was too late to start trying to be fashionable. I needed things I would be comfortable in. The attendant was Asian but very very English. Oh, it's so *you*, sir,' he kept saying. 'It's you to a T.' I bought everything, wincing at the cost, wondering if I had taken leave of my senses. My only indecision was, in fact, over the underpants. In the end I bought jockey shorts for the first time in my life, feeling really rather bold, for I suspected that the Dashing Dane and the Mercurial Man Mountain from Merthyr would both be jockey shorts men. The attendant was utterly charming throughout, as indeed he should have been, for this must have been the easiest sale of his life.

I went back to my room, stood in the tiny bath, had a hand-held shower that only trickled, washed my hair, discovered that there wasn't a hair dryer, carefully dressed myself from neck to toe in my new clothes, looked in the mirror, and saw a man who looked like a model in an advert for insurance for the senior citizen.

Any self-assurance that I still had melted away completely. I felt a sudden sickness in my stomach and an excruciating pain in my balls. 'We aren't used to this. What the hell's going on?' they were saying. I had to go and lie down.

She wouldn't come. She would. She wouldn't. I blew metaphorical dandelion heads and didn't know which I dreaded most – her coming or her not coming.

I did consider the option of not turning up myself, but I knew that I couldn't do that to her. There are things that a gentleman can't do, and, anachronistic though it was, I still thought of myself as a gentleman.

But why oh why had I asked her out?

FOUR

L'ESCARGOT BLEU WAS dismayingly quiet – just three tables taken. Oh, how I wished I had known of somewhere less starchy. I'd read that London was now the most exciting place to eat in the whole world. This restaurant wasn't remotely exciting. It was a relic from the past, and so was I, so it was just what I didn't need.

I got there before her, feeling very self-conscious in my new clothes. I seated myself at a little table by the bar. As soon as I sat down I realised that the jockey shorts were far too tight around my crutch and were constricting my private parts. I longed to stand up and give them a good hitch, but I didn't dare to.

My new clothes consisted of a check jacket, plain beige trousers, matching shirt, conservative plain blue tie. Oh God, was that what was 'so very *you*, sir'? I knew, the moment I entered the restaurant, that my shopping spree had been an opportunity missed – but then, if I was good at anything it was at missing opportunities. It was there that my genius resided.

I ordered a dry sherry. The moment I ordered it I regretted that I hadn't made a slightly trendier, slightly less British, slightly more worldly choice. I decided to call the barman back to change my order, but when he turned in response to my 'Excuse me . . .' I said, 'No, sorry, it doesn't matter', because I didn't want him to think that I was indecisive. I don't think I had ever felt so nervous in my life, even when taking my fourth driving test.

By this time I was convinced that she wouldn't come, I hoped that she wouldn't come, and then, suddenly, there she was and I knew in less than a second that I could hardly have borne it if she hadn't come.

She was wearing a very shiny outfit, in lurid green. On the whole I didn't think I liked the material, but my consolation was that there was very little of it. It was extremely low cut, revealing a charming cleavage, and it was also very high cut, if that is the right phrase, which I doubt, showing lots of no less delightful leg. There was also a gap in the middle, exposing flesh far too young for me. I would

hate you to think I am a snob. Rachel was a snob. Jane is a snob. I am not. Nevertheless, I have to admit that I was relieved that the tattoo I had glimpsed on the train was now hidden.

She was probably the first person in the history of L'Escargot Bleu to order a pint of lager as an aperitif. The barman wanted to grin at her, but his job wouldn't allow him to. I don't usually notice things like that, but I noticed that I was noticing things I wouldn't usually notice. My senses were sharpened by her arrival, her nearness, her presence, her loveliness.

I suppose I ought to admit, in the interests of that prim mistress, Truth, that if you saw her you would probably not think her beautiful. Attractive, yes, but not beautiful. You might describe her as somewhat elfin, or what the French call *gamine*, but what other people might think of her is, ultimately, irrelevant.

There was she, five foot three, raising a pint glass of lager, and there was I, six foot and half an inch (I don't do metric), raising my tiny sherry glass. We clinked carefully, for fear the beer glass would shatter the sherry glass, and she said, 'Cheers, Alan.'

'Cheers, Ange.'

She smiled, and there was shyness in her smile.

'I've never been out with a philosopher before,' she said.

'I've never been out with a darts groupie,' I replied.

'I was gobsmacked when you asked me.'

It was my turn to smile shyly.

'I was *very* . . . er . . . gob . . . er . . . surprised when I asked you.'

'I wondered if you'd turn up.'

'I wondered if *you*'d turn up.'

'I'm glad you did.'

'I'm glad *you* did.'

'I bet you don't have conversations like this with your philosopher mates.'

I smiled inwardly at her use of the word 'mates'. How little she knew of my life. I didn't have any philosopher mates. The nicer philosophers that I knew were deadly rivals, the nastier were deadly enemies.

'Not quite, no,' I agreed.

An elderly French waiter, a man of the old school, collected us from the bar, placed our drinks on a tray, with a faint supercilious sniff towards the pint, and led us into the restaurant like a funeral director escorting a grieving widow into church. He had white hair

and a long nose, ideal for looking down at people contemptuously. He made good use of this natural gift. As he led us, I tried to free my private parts from the constriction of the jockey shorts with a few subtle jerking movements. I was unsuccessful, and it must have looked to the other diners as if I was suffering from St Vitus Dance.

The waiter took us, as I had known he would, to the table next to the toilets. I didn't protest. It's my natural place in the scheme of things: Alan Calcutt, next to the toilets.

He handed us unfashionably huge menus and also handed me a very serious wine list which would have made the Domesday Book look like a leaflet.

'Bleedin' 'ell, it's expensive,' she said, just as I was making a similar observation to myself in slightly different words.

She studied the menu in silence, her lips moving slightly as she read, and frowning when she came to difficult words, words like *darne* and *galantine*, words which were new to her and which I only vaguely understood.

I made my choice, and turned to the wine list. There were more than a hundred clarets, ranging in price from twenty-four pounds to five hundred and twenty.

'Can I see?' she asked.

I handed it to her. She almost buckled under the weight. She turned the pages slowly. Time seemed to stand still. The waiter hovered obtrusively, but did not approach.

'They've got it,' she said. 'The one I like.'

I felt a shiver of fear. I couldn't afford five hundred and twenty pounds. But the reality was possibly even worse.

'They've put it under "rest of the world".' she said. 'That can't be right, cos it's French. *Liebfraumilch*.'

The waiter approached like gas across a battlefield.

'Madam,' he commanded.

'I'll have the terrine, please,' said Ange, 'and the fillet steak with pepper sauce. What does that come with?'

'On its own, madam.'

'Bleedin' 'ell, it's daylight fu . . . oops, sorry . . . king robbery. With . . . er . . . sauté potatoes, mashed potatoes, peas, cauliflower and green beans.'

'How would you like your steak, madam?'

'Well done.'

'Sir?' He could barely get the word out, such was his contempt.

'I'll have the scallops, and I'll have the pheasant with courgettes.'

'Very good, sir.'

'We'll see if it is.'

Oh God, why did I say that?

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'You said, "Very good". I said, "We'll see if it is very good".'

'Yes, sir.'

'And . . . er . . . we'll have a bottle of . . . er . . . ' I swallowed. This took courage. This went against everything I had been bred for. ' . . . of the Liebfraumilch.'

He scurried off. I had not thought him capable of moving so fast.

'I've never had pheasant,' said Ange.

'It's very nice if it's well hung,' I said.

'Does that make a difference?'

'All the difference.'

'Tons Thomas must be nice to eat, then.'

I confess that this remark puzzled me, but I didn't challenge it. I knew how ignorant I was about darts. Here, though, was a convenient cue, an ideal opportunity to ask her, to draw her out, to enter the fascinating unknown world of competitive darts. Something prevented me. Jealousy towards Tons Thomas, perhaps. Anyway, I just couldn't bring myself to broach the subject. I knew that I needed to make conversation. I could hardly expect her to make the running, unsophisticated as she was, but I could think of nothing to say. It's quite hard, actually, to admit to you how inept I was that night.

'It's filling up a bit,' I said, as two more people, stuffily dressed, entered the silent temple of gastronomy. I winced. 'It's filling up a bit,' observes Alan Calcutt, once thought to be one of the bright young hopes of British philosophical thinking.

The waiter arrived with our bottle of Liebfraumilch. He held it gingerly, as if he might catch a fatal disease off it. He showed it to me. I nodded wretchedly. I wanted to be anywhere else than here. This was all a terrible mistake.

He went away, and returned a moment later with the opened bottle. As he poured me a sip to taste, Ange leant forward and said, almost in a whisper, 'Wouldn't you think of going back to Mum, Dad?'

The waiter ignored this remark so pointedly that I knew he had heard it. I sniffed the sweet wine, took a sip, nodded miserably. The

waiter poured half a glass for us both and retreated hastily.

‘What on earth did you say that for?’ I asked.

‘Bit of fun. I like fun, don’t I? Cheers.’

She raised her glass. I raised mine. We drank.

‘M’m. Nice.’

‘No.’

‘What?’

‘It’s not nice.’

‘Well, I think it is.’

‘Maybe, but, believe me, it isn’t.’

‘I’m not a philosopher like you, but I’d have thought that if I think it’s nice then for me it is nice, whatever you say.’

‘Well, yes, that’s true.’

I had a sinking feeling that I was going to say ‘Well, yes, that’s true’ a lot. I didn’t have the energy for argument that I once had. There had been a time when I would even have ventured to disagree with taxi drivers. Not any more. However, I felt that I needed to make a bit of a stab at defending my position.

‘When Kath Parker had her stag do in Dublin we was all knocking back the Liebfraumilch till it was coming out of our ears and we all thought it was lovely,’ she said. ‘How can you say we was all wrong?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I suppose I would argue that if people who know a lot about wine all say that a wine isn’t nice, and people who don’t know much about wine all say that it is nice, the probability is that it’s the people who know about wine who are actually right.’

‘That’s the first time tonight you’ve sounded like a philosopher,’ she said.

I didn’t know whether to say ‘Thank you’ or ‘Sorry’.

‘Were you always a philosopher?’

‘I started to teach philosophy after university, yes. I went to Oxford and somehow I’ve never left it. It does that to you.’

I found myself chatting about myself, not asking her about her. Rachel would have said that this was typical. Oh God, why was I still thinking about bloody Rachel?

Suddenly I was talking to Ange in quite an unsuitable way, but anything was better than silence, and at least I was being myself. It was strange. I felt that I was hovering over myself, listening to myself being pretentious. I was having an out of body experience, which I would previously have said was impossible.

‘I tended to see myself as a bit of a maverick when I was young, a lone philosophical wolf. Arthur Holdall once said my problem was that I couldn’t decide whether to be an *enfant noir* or a *bête terrible*.’

‘Arthur Holdall?’

‘A colleague.’

‘I bet he’s a case.’

‘What? Ah. Yes. Yes. He once described me as a weir over which the turbulent currents of existentialism flowed into the stagnant pools of logical positivism.’

I gave a deep sigh.

‘Oh, Alan,’ she said. It was the first time she’d used my name just like that, as if she’d known me for quite a while, and it sounded very pleasant, very natural. ‘What an awful sigh. I can’t help it if I don’t understand. Wish you weren’t here with me?’

Yes.

‘No!’

Yes and no.

‘No, Ange, I was just thinking, nobody would describe me as Holdall did nowadays. I am one of that great army of thinkers who haven’t fulfilled their promise.’

Luckily the waiter arrived with our starters, interrupting this morbid self-pity. His arrival wasn’t altogether lucky, though. It set her off again.

‘What was it like in Pentonville, Dad? I mean the nosh. Was it any better than the Scrubs?’

The waiter’s whole body stiffened. He tried to give me the terrine and her the scallops, even though he must have known that it was the other way round.

My flesh crawled with embarrassment.

‘You’re embarrassing me,’ I said, when he had gone. ‘I don’t want you to say things like that.’

‘Oh, Alan,’ she said again. ‘Who cares what a snobby Frog waiter thinks?’

Casual racial insults of that kind horrify me. There was a risk that she would think me very stuffy, that she would be hurt, that I would be pouring cold water on our evening, but I couldn’t let it go. I might have done with a taxi driver, especially a big taxi driver, but not with a dining companion.

‘You shouldn’t refer to the French as Frogs,’ I said. ‘They’re a very civilised nation, with a very strong cultural tradition. Have you ever

heard of a man called Jean Paul Sartre?’

She thought hard, wrinkling her pert little nose. I longed to trace the curl of her nostrils with a gentle finger.

‘Didn’t he used to play for Arsenal?’

‘He was a philosopher. He was an existentialist.’

‘A what?’

How could I explain existentialism to her, without my scallops going cold? The scallops were good, but not great. The freshness of the sea had long departed from them. At that price, it shouldn’t have. I munched and thought.

‘Existentialism is a philosophy that is based on freedom of choice, on taking responsibility for one’s own actions, which create one’s own moral values and determine one’s future.’ I was aware that I was sounding like a text book again.

She thought about that pretty hard.

‘Actually that sounds quite sensible,’ she said. ‘Good old Sparta.’

‘Sartre. What do you mean?’

‘Well, it sounds to me as though he’s cracked it. Is that the answer, then?’

‘The answer to what?’

‘Philosophy.’

‘Ah. If only it were that simple. Philosophy is a process, Ange. It explores and examines. It is, ultimately, historically, more to do with asking questions than finding answers. Existentialists found their answers. Many other people question their answers and refute them. It’s an on-going process.’

‘It’s all a bit beyond me. Easy come, easy go, that’s me. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die, that’s me.’

‘That’s epicureanism.’

‘It is?’ She was delighted.

‘Well, broadly, yes.’

‘Get that! I’m an epicureanist!’

I smiled, thrilled by her delight. For many years I had been feeling that I smelt stale. Not horrid. Not sweaty. I didn’t have BO or halitosis. I just smelt stale. My breath, when it came back to me off a mirror, my armpits, my shirts – vaguely stale.

I was conscious of that now, and I suppose, therefore, that I already knew, deep down, that this girl could wash my staleness away.

‘I hope I don’t sound patronising, Ange,’ I said, ‘but if you have

any questions, any time, about philosophy or indeed about anything, please don't hesitate to ask.'

The waiter cleared away our plates lugubriously, standing a bit away from the table and reaching for them.

'Was your terrine all right?' I asked.

'Yeah. It was good. Very garlicky, I'm afraid.'

If she was worried about the garlic, she expected us to end up close to each other. I shivered with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. I couldn't say, now, which was the stronger. Probably I couldn't have said it then either.

'There is one question,' she said.

'Yes. Yes. Good. Excellent. Fire away. I'll do my best.'

'If you hate bananas, how come you had one in your briefcase?'

'What? Oh, I see. Ah. Well, my hotel in Manchester, if you're well known, they put a bowl of fruit in your room. I'm innately mean, and cannot bear to leave what is free.'

'Are you well known then?'

Her amazement wasn't flattering, but I wasn't offended. In fact it amused me.

'Not really. Not outside my field, my very narrow field, but I was in Manchester to speak at a conference, and I think they classify all the speakers as celebrities.'

'What's your other name again?'

'Calcutt. Alan Calcutt.'

'No. Sorry. Never heard of you.' She gave me a quite lovely smile, childlike, affectionate, kind. It took away all the abruptness of her remark. 'Is that as incredible as you never having heard of Tons Thomas?'

'Probably not. I think that in the world at large he's probably more widely known than me. Sadly. So what's *your* other name?'

She looked a little embarrassed, for the first time.

'Bedwell.'

Our eyes met. I was terrified that I was going to blush. I didn't, but the effort of not doing so left me feeling limp and exhausted.

'Here's another one,' she said, changing the subject hurriedly, and I must say I was very relieved to find that she too was capable of embarrassment.

'Good. Good. Fire away.'

The waiter was returning with our main courses. This might be my chance to impress him.

'Name three fish that begin and end with K.'

It wouldn't be my chance to impress him.

'Er . . . oh, I've no idea, I really haven't.'

'Try.'

The waiter put her plate down in front of her. Her fillet steak looked like a tiny burnt offering in the middle of its huge white plate. The pepper sauce was dribbled over the plate so artistically that I felt that it would look better hanging in the Tate.

'Kipper begins with a k. Haddock ends with a k,' I said. 'Sorry, that's about the best that I can do.'

My pheasant was barely more substantial than her steak.

'Give up?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Killer shark. Kwik-Save deep frozen smoked haddock. Kilmarnock.'

'Kilmarnock?'

'Well, it's a place.'

Her laugh rang out through that silent temple of gastronomy like a fart in a cathedral. The waiter took her plate of vegetables from a minion, banged it down beside her steak, placed a dish with seven slices of courgette beside my pheasant, and hurried off, shaking his head.

'It looks lovely,' she said, 'but you don't get a lot for the money, do you?'

'The more you pay, the less you get,' I explained. 'It's called refinement. That's why the plates are now so huge in fashionable restaurants – to make the food look small and banish any possible charge of grossness.'

I didn't really know about such things, but it was what Lawrence had said once, in a posh restaurant outside Abingdon, in an attempt to upset Jane.

'Is your pheasant nice?' asked Ange.

'Very.'

'The way they've served it, you can't see if it's well hung.'

'Well it would hardly look well hung, would it? It would smell or taste well hung. You wouldn't say to me, "Hello, Alan, you look of horse manure." You'd say, "Hello, Alan, you smell of horse manure."'

'I wouldn't dream of saying that.'

'No, no, no . . . of course not. You've missed the point.'

I can't remember much that we talked about after that. We were busy eating, of course, and I think our conversation was rather desultory, and I'm pretty sure that we didn't mention darts or philosophy. I was finding it quite difficult to digest my pheasant. My stomach was heaving with nerves.

I couldn't manage a dessert, but I did have a glass of vintage port, leaving the last of the Liebfraumilch for Ange. She plumped for the Pavlova. When the waiter took the order, she said, 'You know, if Mum was sure you was serious about going straight this time I think she might have you back.' His outrage was greater than ever. Even the hairs in his nose seemed to stiffen.

When the Pavlova and my glass of port arrived I suddenly began to shake. Not uncontrollably. I don't think she would have seen.

This is a terrible confession, but sometimes I feel an irrational urge to do something really horrific – like swing my little car into the path of an oncoming lorry, just because it's possible. I never do, and I don't think I ever will, but it terrifies me.

Well now, as the waiter approached, I felt an extraordinary desire to do something not equally rash, not horrific at all, but, for me, utterly revolutionary.

I not only felt the desire. I gave in to it.

'Ange,' I said, 'be honest. Did Mum have many affairs while I was away, or was it just the postman?'

Her mouth dropped open, as indeed did the waiter's, but I was glad to see that her mouth dropped open even wider than his.

The moment I had said it I broke out into a bit of a sweat, which cooled rather unpleasantly as the evening wore on.

'Not bad,' she said, when the waiter had scurried off. 'Not bad at all. Hidden depths.'

When the bill came, I noticed that there was a mistake, a mistake which gave me an opportunity for further roguishness, which I did not spurn.

'Waiter!' I called.

The waiter approached with comical reluctance.

'I make the ad hoc deduction that you have made a deduction and should add hock.'

When a man tries humour for the first time, he cannot expect every joke to be a success. This one fell horribly flat. Neither Ange nor the waiter understood it.

'You've left the wine off,' I explained.

‘Ah!’ He scowled. He was seriously embarrassed, less by his mistake and my discovery of his mistake than because he was going to have to thank me.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said through gritted teeth.

‘What was all that about adding hock?’ asked Ange.

‘It was a sort of Latin pun. It was a joke.’

‘Oh. Oh well.’

We stood up. I had no idea what would happen next or indeed what I wanted to happen next. She saved me, even though it would only be a temporary salvation.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s find a pub. I know one with a darts board, and I couldn’t half sink a pint.’

FIVE

‘SO WHY ARE we all here then?’ she asked.

I looked round the bare, Spartan room at the groups of drinkers, mostly sitting and chatting, one couple kissing, almost eating each other. I felt out of place. I doubt if I had been into more than ten pubs in my life. I hated the smell of beer and chips and furniture polish and toilets. This was a pub on its last legs. The carpet bore evidence of accidents of various kinds. The stuffing was peeping out of two of the seats. The ashtrays had not been emptied for hours, maybe days.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I presume people like the company and the conviviality, and as you say, it’s one of the few left in Central London with a darts board.’

‘No! Stupid!’ She grinned and gave me one of her quick kisses. I had seen her smile and laugh, but this was her first grin. It was a grin of triumph. She had caught me out. ‘Why are we all here? Why do we exist? What’s the point of it all? Come on. You’re the philosopher.’

I took a sip of my beer. Flat, warm, bitter. I had drunk a half of beer occasionally, just to be sociable, but this was a pint. It looked enormous. I would never get through it. If I did get through it, I would be peeing all night. Where should I start with my explanations? Did I have the energy? I wished that I could believe that God existed. I might have been able to ask Him for strength.

It had been quite a long taxi ride. ‘You wouldn’t believe it,’ she had said, ‘but these days there aren’t hardly any pubs in Central London with a darts board. I mean, it’s a capital city, innit, for God’s sake. What’s our sodding civilisation coming to? It’s a national disgrace.’

I had wondered, in the taxi, whether to reach out and hold her hand. God, it was exhausting being so self-conscious. It seemed to me that I was incapable of any physical movement that was spontaneous. It filled me with depression and weariness. What was I doing here? Why had I ever asked her out? I even had a vision of

Lawrence and Jane, watching me, laughing at me, despairing of me.

There had been a brief few moments, in the fresh air – ‘fresh’, that’s a laugh, each breath I take in London is a reminder about pollution – and then we had entered the pub and I had faced this dreadful wall of false cheeriness and beery companionship. Oh for a glass of port or Madeira and a civilised discussion of the failings of my fellow dons. I felt wildly over-dressed for these surroundings.

Three young men in grubby T-shirts were playing darts as if their lives depended on it. I wished that I was playing with them, anything rather than the burden of explanation and the inevitability of disappointment.

I took a deep breath and began.

‘Ah. Well. You’ve asked a question to which there is no definite answer.’

‘A cop-out, in other words.’

‘No. No. A necessity, Ange. Whether we believe that there is a God who created the universe or whether we believe that the universe has evolved through natural and physical processes, we cannot yet conceive, and may well never be able to conceive, let alone know, how anything began in the first place. To posit the existence of a God solves nothing, because it leaves us with the question, “Who created God?” And it is pointless to search for proof of the existence of God because the whole strength and force of religion lies in faith, and you cannot have faith without ignorance. So . . .’

‘Nice arrows!’

‘What?’

‘That bloke just got a ton.’

‘Ah!’

I wasn’t upset by her interruption. I was relieved. I decided that at last it was time to put the advice I’d been given in that correspondence course to good use. I would ask her questions, which would be so much less stressful than answering them.

‘What . . . er . . . what is a ton?’

‘Bleedin’ ‘ell. A ton’s a hundred. That’s why Tons Thomas is known as Tons, because he gets lots of tons. Tons of tons.’

She laughed at her little joke. I didn’t feel up to laughing, but I had to say something.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes.’

It’s a habit I have, I know, to say ‘Yes’ when there is nothing else

to say, or when there is a silence that unnerves me. She didn't let it go.

'When I make a joke, you say "Yes",' she said.

'Yes. Yes. Yes, I suppose I'm saying, "Yes. I recognise that as a joke."'

'It'd be a pretty poor look-out for Peter Kay if every time he made a joke the whole audience just shouted out, "Yes, I recognise that as a joke."'

'Yes. Sorry.'

That's another word I use too much. People bump into me in the street because they aren't looking where they're going, and *I* say 'Sorry'. I think that if I had been able to speak when I was born I would have looked up at my mother and said, 'Sorry.'

'I reckon you're all screwed up.'

'Yes. Sorry.'

I was feeling more than somewhat discomfited because I had felt that unwelcome stab of jealousy again at her mention of Tons Thomas. I hated the feeling. It was so petty, so mean, so demeaning. I realise now, on reflection, that I should have welcomed it. It was, after all, a sign that I was not entirely emotionally dead, as I had feared I was, but at the time, stuck in a corner of the pub, at the little table nearest to the toilets (yes, there were some constants in my life), I found it horrible. I wished she wouldn't talk about Tons Thomas – but I also feared that, if she stopped, it would only be to talk about Shanghai Sorensen, the much too dashing Dane.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I shouldn't have interrupted, but, you know, I can't help getting excited when I see good darts thrown. Sorry, I *was* listening about God and that stuff. Go on about philosophy and that, cos I think I must be missing something if you're trying to find out something which the whole point of it is you can't find it out.'

'Well, I was saying to you that philosophy is to a very large extent a question of . . . a question of asking questions, a question of asking ourselves what sort of questions we should be asking ourselves, a question of . . .'

'Nice finish!'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry, but that bloke just made a three-dart finish. I'm sorry, Alan, I *was* listening, but I mean, in a pub, an ordinary pub, you don't expect to see a three dart finish, cos, believe me, there are some really crappy darts players around, and he needed ninety-nine

and he got them, treble nineteen, two, double top, that's what we call a three-dart finish, see? Hey, do you want a game?'

I wanted a game less than almost anything I could think of, but I didn't have the energy to say this to her, and she took my silence as assent.

'Hey, you guys,' she called out. 'Can we challenge you to a game?'

This shook me to the roots. These people were good. The last time I had played darts, more than twenty years ago, the college bursar had beaten me.

The three darts players looked at her, and then they looked at me, and then they looked at each other, and one of them said, 'Nah. We've finished. You and your dad have a game.'

I closed my eyes and wished that I was anywhere but there. I heard, as if from far away, Ange saying, 'He's not my dad. I wouldn't play tiddlywinks with that tosser.'

I felt her take my hand and squeeze it. I opened my eyes and saw that she was smiling at me. It was a moment that I would come to recognise as being quintessentially Ange. She was being sensitive and cunning at the same time. Sensitive, because she knew what I was feeling. Cunning, because she knew that the darts player's remark would spoil our still fragile relationship if she let it.

'Come on,' she said, pulling me gently to my feet. 'Let's play darts.'

So there I was, at ten to eleven on a Tuesday night, in a busy pub, with more than three-quarters of a pint of flat beer staring reproachfully at me from my straight glass, being given three darts by a young lady, and having to play this ghastly game in front of three young men who had just shown themselves to be thoroughly proficient at it. I had rarely felt so embarrassed even in the theatre of self-consciousness that was my life to date.

'Five-oh-one, no starting double,' said Ange.

What on earth did she mean? Maybe I would find out.

'I'm going to be Nineteens Normanton,' she said. 'Who are you going to be?'

'What?'

'It's more fun if you pretend to be someone. I'm going to pretend to be Nineteens Normanton.'

'Nineteens?'

'He's unusual among top players. He doesn't go much for twenties. It's all nineteens with him.'

‘And no doubt you’ve slept with him.’

She glared at me, really quite fiercely.

‘What if I have?’ she said. ‘What if I fucking well have? That’s my business.’

I didn’t reply. I didn’t even object to her swearing. I realised that I had made a very bad move. I was terrified that we were on the verge of a full-scale row. I didn’t want a row, certainly not in public. I didn’t know if she might storm out. If she did, I would never see her again. I realised to my amazement that I would be devastated if I didn’t see her again. Actually I felt quite devastated by this realisation.

The moment passed. She wrote NN on the top left of the blackboard.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘I’ll be Einstein,’ I said.

‘Good. Nice one.’

I could tell that she was really pleased by this piece of invention. She chalked a large I on the top right of the board. I didn’t tell her that it should be E. I was handling her with kid gloves now.

She let me go first. I scored seven. She chalked 494 under I. Then she threw three twenties.

‘A steady start from the burly champion,’ she said.

With my next three darts I scored eleven. One of them bounced back off the surrounds to the board. ‘483,’ chalked Ange.

With her second go, she hit single twenty, treble twenty and a five.

‘Eighty-five. Einstein’s in big trouble now. Will his famous theory of relativity save him?’

She gave me a triumphant glance, and I hurriedly looked suitably impressed at her knowledge of Einstein, which I must say surprised me and rather thrilled me.

I won’t go right through the progress of that dreadful game. I didn’t look round once, for fear I would see that people in the pub were watching my humiliation, and, if they were, that they were laughing at me. I told myself that darts didn’t matter, there was no evidence that either Kant or Wittgenstein had ever played the game, I was a respected figure in the world of Academia, it was absurd to be concerned. But I hated it. Suffice it to say that at one stage, under NN, the scores were 441, 356, 302, 202, 166, 96, 40, and under I they were 494, 483, 480, 466, 456, 449, 438. Even Ange’s

running commentary began to lose its sparkle, as she realised that I was providing no real opposition.

And all through the game, every time another success was recorded under those dread initials NN, I was wondering if she had slept with Nineteens Normanton. It was a boil that throbbed, and I didn't know how to lance it.

At last our mismatch was over. I must say that I wondered, on that evening, if there was any activity in the world as boring as the game of darts.

We returned to our table. I took a sip of my beer. There was still more than half a pint to go. People were beginning to drift away into the night, happily, cheerily, easily, sexily. Ange drained the last of her lager and stood up.

'My shout,' she said. 'What are you having? A chaser?'

I didn't dare admit that I didn't know what a chaser was, my ignorance had damaged the reputation of philosophers enough already, but I couldn't face the prospect of another drink of any kind. Besides, it was time to grasp the nettle.

'Ange,' I said. 'Sit down. I . . . er . . . I've something to say to you.'

She looked at me in surprise, and sat down.

'I . . . er . . . I haven't got my car with me,' I began.

I was sweating again. I was feeling claustrophobic. The ceiling seemed to be dropping on me. The walls seemed to be sliding towards me. I was finding it difficult to breath.

'I . . . er . . . well, you know I haven't got my car, because we met on the train, and the last train to Oxford from London is something of a social ordeal these days . . . well also I didn't want to rush our dinner, so . . . er . . . I'm not going back to Oxford tonight. I booked into a hotel.'

'That makes sense. I mean, they've got beds there. They're used to people staying the night.'

'Yes. Yes. You were right in what you said. I am screwed up. Will you . . . will you spend the night with me . . . and unscrew me?'

SIX

IN THE TAXI I put my hand very shyly on hers. I stroked her hand very gently. I felt an answering stroke, and then suddenly she kissed my ear, sliding her tongue round the inside of it, which gave me goose-pimples. I thought it a very strange thing to do. The insides of ears seemed remarkably unattractive to me, and I thought that it must have been a very waxy experience. At least I knew that the ear was clean. 'Behind and inside the ears, dear,' my mother had cried, sternly, almost every morning, before she packed me off to prep school.

I wished I hadn't thought of my mother just then. What would she think if she could see me now?

Ange's kissing of my ear made me realise how little I knew about love-making. I wished the whole of my life had been different, but I knew that, if it had been, I wouldn't have been in this taxi now.

When all too soon we arrived at the hotel I could see, beyond the lift, that the bar was still open. I clutched cravenly at the opportunity it presented.

'Would you like a nightcap?' I asked.

'Yeah. Why not?'

She had a Bailey's, I an armagnac. The bar was cavernous and far from full. It had all the atmosphere of a works canteen. In a corner a group of men in cheap shiny suits laughed, with a harsh communal explosion of mirthlessness.

'Salesmen,' said Ange.

'What?'

'That sort of thing, anyway. Been to a do. One of them's forgotten to take his name tag off.'

There was another burst of hard, cruel laughter.

'They seem to be having a lot of fun,' I said.

'They're telling sick jokes,' she said.

'Would you rather be with them?'

'You've got to be joking,' she said. 'How can you say that? They're wankers. Don't tell me that's another word you don't know.'

‘No, no. No, I’m afraid I have reason to know that one.’

Our eyes met briefly.

‘They’re sad bastards,’ she said, ‘and them people at the bar are sad too. Up on business, nowhere to go, can’t think of sod all to do cos they’ve only got half a brain, no friends to meet, no woman with them, what woman would look at them, and they fill themselves with booze till the bar closes and they have to go to bed and face themselves. The barmaid’s from Eastern Europe and wishes she could earn even half the pittance she gets here back home. We’re the only people in here who aren’t sad. This is a very sad place.’

I had never thought of my life as sad, but I realised at that moment how sad it had been. If it hadn’t, I would not have been so absurdly pleased by Ange’s assertion that she and I were not sad.

‘Another Bailey’s?’

‘I’ve had enough, thanks.’

‘Ah. Right. Well . . .’

‘Lost your bottle, have you?’

I smiled sadly. It was much more complex than that. I was so much older than her, I had met her so recently, I hardly knew her, she hardly knew me, I was utterly unused to this kind of thing, I didn’t know why I wanted to be there, and to an extent I didn’t want to be there, and yet I knew that, despite that, I really did want to be there. How could I say all or any of that to her?

‘No,’ I said. ‘I haven’t lost my bottle. I would have to say that to lose one’s bottle implies that one had one’s bottle once. I don’t think I’ve ever had my bottle.’

‘Time to start then, innit?’

Blackstone of Preston strutted his stuff again. Ange searched for my hand and squeezed it reassuringly. My whole body went stiff, except for the one bit that should have. My private parts couldn’t have felt more shrivelled if I’d been taking a Christmas Day dip in the sea at Skegness.

We stepped out of the lift into the hotel’s dim world of long, drab corridors lit by long-life bulbs. We turned right towards Room 393. We passed the eight paintings and the two bright-red fire extinguishers. I felt like a man being escorted towards the hangman’s noose. In my tension and fear I could feel no sexual desire whatsoever.

We walked along those dreary corridors in silence, but as we

arrived at the room Ange spoke. I couldn't believe that her mood was so different from mine.

'Three-nine-three,' she said. 'Three's my lucky number, and three goes into nine three times so this room is going to be *really* lucky. Clever old Alan to get Room 393.'

I slid the plastic key into the slot. A red light flashed briefly. I slid it several times. Each time, a red light flashed.

She took the key card from me and inserted it herself. Still the light flashed red.

'Oh shit,' she said.

'My sentiments entirely,' I said. 'Oh God, this is awkward. I'm going to have to get the night porter, and he'll see you.'

'Embarrassed about me, are you?'

'No, don't be so quick to take offence. Of course I'm not. I'm embarrassed about the situation, not you.'

'Oh! So what sort of situation would you call it?'

Oh God. I didn't want to be arguing about this.

'Dirty old man with his bit of stuff, is that it?'

'Ange!'

I had shouted.

'You'll wake people up,' she warned me.

'I don't fucking care,' I shouted.

'Alan!'

She looked utterly astonished, and my anger left me as suddenly as it had come.

'Sorry,' I said yet again, and, in case she didn't believe me, I repeated it, 'Sorry. No, Ange,' I continued. 'My embarrassment is nothing to do with me or you or our situation, whatever that is. It's just that I've booked a single room and there are two of us.'

'They couldn't care less about that. The night porter won't know. He'll think we're married. Girls do sometimes marry much older men.'

It was her turn to say 'Sorry'.

'Oh sod that stupid bloody key card,' she said. 'Come on, you little bastard.'

She slid the card in one more time, and a green light flashed. We were in.

I pressed the switch and the lights flickered into life. I was going to say 'and the room was flooded with light', but that would have been a vast exaggeration. A pale yellow gloom pervaded the scene.

‘Not much cop, is it?’ she said.

She sat down on the bed and began taking her shoes off. I stood by the door.

‘Aren’t you going to take your clothes off?’ she asked.

‘Sorry.’

‘Do you usually make love with your clothes on?’

‘No. No . . . er . . . look . . .’

‘Cos I don’t.’

She began to take her tights off.

‘No,’ I said urgently. ‘Please. Don’t take your clothes off. Not . . . er . . . not yet.’

‘What is all this?’ she asked.

I felt happier now. I had made up my mind. I was no longer a pathetic, indecisive figure. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew what I wanted from her. And it was my room, after all, and it was *I* who had asked *her* out, and it was perfectly fair that the relationship should be conducted on my terms.

I felt happier, yes, but that didn’t make what I had to say easy. It was hardly conventional. It could hardly be welcome to her. There was a risk that she would not accept it. I did know enough about women to know that she would not find my words exactly flattering. I wasn’t sure how best to express it.

‘I’m sorry, Ange, but . . .’ I began hesitantly.

‘Look, if you *have* lost your bottle, fair enough. Everyone loses their bottle sometimes. If it’s any comfort, even Shanghai Sorensen wasn’t all that fantastic. Put it this way, it wasn’t exactly treble twenty.’

It wasn’t any comfort. I wasn’t at all thrilled to hear her talk about Shanghai Sorensen. I think that she thought that she was being thoughtful in telling me of his lack of prowess, but I found it thoughtless in the extreme. However, I had to tread carefully.

‘It’s not that,’ I said.

I sat on the bed beside her. Her tights were down by her ankles, but she hadn’t undressed any further. I put my arm round her shoulders.

‘And it’s not that I don’t find you attractive. I do. You are.’

‘Thanks. You *aren’t* gay, are you?’

‘No!’ Political correctness has entered the world of the university so strongly that even in the privacy of this hotel bedroom I felt a need to qualify this over-emphasised denial. ‘Not that I’d want you

to think that I'm implying that there's anything wrong in being gay, but I happen not to be. You're lovely. Lovely.'

She turned to me and searched my face. She was concerned, and puzzled. I would have to express myself very carefully.

'What do you want from me, Alan?' she asked. 'What is your game?'

It came out much more simply than I had dared to hope.

'I want you for your mind.'

SEVEN

‘TELL ME ABOUT your family,’ I said.

‘What about them?’

We were lying side by side, fully clothed, on that sagging bed, in that unlovely room. That seems bizarre to me now, but it seemed quite natural at the time.

‘Well, where are you from?’

‘Gallows Corner.’

‘I’ve never heard of it.’

‘It’s like a sort of suburb of Romford. I’m a real Essex girl, aren’t I?’

‘I know that phrase, of course, but what exactly does it mean?’

‘It means a girl from Essex.’

‘I know a girl from Essex in Oxford. She’s called Amanda Parkes-Bollington. She’s the daughter of a solicitor from Halstead. So she’s an Essex girl?’

‘Course she isn’t.’

‘So it isn’t just a girl from Essex. So what is it?’

‘Well . . . it’s . . . you know . . . the Thames estuary, it’s not exactly bleeding landed gentry, know what I mean? It’s girls from, you know, Romford, Ilford, Southend. They have tattoos. They go out half-naked and binge-drink. They’re Chavs. They’re like bling, know what I mean?’

‘Yes,’ I lied. ‘Yes.’

There were so many words that one never came across in the world of philosophy. How could I continue to make conversation with this girl?

‘They wear white stilettos and have very tanned legs. Well, very tanned everything, really.’

‘Your shoes are brown.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m, you know, a bit pissed off with being an Essex girl really. That’s why . . .’

She stopped. I wondered whether she had been about to say ‘That’s why I’m here with you.’ Was that why she was there with

me?

'We're not supposed to be very bright. There's a joke about an Essex girl, she's going to go on a motoring holiday in France, but she's worried about driving on the right, so she tries it from Dagenham to Clacton.'

'Yes. Yes.'

'Oh not that "Yes, I recognise that as a joke" again.'

'Sorry.'

'Oh, not that "sorry" again.'

'Sorry.'

'I mean for all that education you're a bit crap at the old chat, aren't you?'

'I do seem to be at the moment, yes. So, what was school like for you?'

'Crap. I wish now that I'd worked. It's not right that you go to school when you're still a kid. It's asking for trouble. You should go when you're grown up and can appreciate it.'

She went silent then.

'Have you nodded off?' I asked.

'No. I couldn't think of anything to say. I'm embarrassed like this, doing it with the light on.'

'Nonsense. You're never embarrassed. I get embarrassed. You don't. Talk to me about anything . . . the room . . . darts . . . your Pavlova tonight . . . anything.'

'I can't.'

I turned the light off, which I hadn't wanted to do, because I enjoyed looking at her face, it was so expressive, so mobile, so lovely. It looked so innocent, unsullied even by the advances of all those darts players, their hairy flesh pressed against hers.

'What are your parents like? Talk to me about them,' I said. 'I want to know you, Ange. Not carnally. Not biblically. Truly. I want to know who you are.'

'You might find out if you stopped rabbiting.'

A merited rebuke. I kept quiet. I waited patiently, but she didn't speak.

'Tell me about your dad,' I said, very quietly, very gently. I knew that she didn't think much of him. She'd called him a tosser to the darts players.

'He's dead.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

‘He died when I was seven.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘I can’t hardly remember him.’

‘No, I suppose you wouldn’t.’

It did cross my mind that it was strange, if she hardly remembered him, that she had called him a tosser, but I supposed that it wasn’t that strange really. Her mother might have told her enough about him to justify the word. Probably she was very close to her mother.

‘And your mum?’

‘What about her?’

‘Well, what does she do?’

‘Cleaning. Takes in ironing. Washing. Bit of dress-making. You know.’

‘No, Ange, I don’t know. I’ve been very lucky.’

‘Mum’s all right. Keeps things going.’

‘Do you love her?’

‘Course I do. She’s my mum.’

‘What about brothers and sisters?’

‘What about them?’

‘Well, do you have any?’

‘One sister, two brothers, there was a third but he drowned in the river when he was three.’

‘Oh my God. Poor Ange.’

‘Yeah, well, it’s life, isn’t it?’

‘Not exactly.’

I felt so close to her, lying at her side talking almost in whispers, and yet so far away from her, with my inability to really imagine what her life in Gallows Corner had been like. I waited patiently for her to continue. It was so quiet in that boxy, stuffy room. So quiet. Then suddenly there was the sound of a man peeing long and loud and from quite a height in the room above, bursting in upon the brief magic of our shared silence. I expected Ange to comment, but she didn’t. I wondered if it had only been in my mind that there had been any magic, any miraculous togetherness, in our silence.

‘Ange?’ I whispered. ‘Are you asleep?’

She was. I felt ridiculously deflated.

I tried to get to sleep too, but it was impossible. I kept thinking about Ange’s life in Gallows Corner, about what Lawrence and Jane would say if they could see me now, about all the work that

remained to be done on my Ferdinand Brinsley Memorial Lecture, about what Ange would think of it if I read it to her, about how we would part in the morning, about . . . oh God . . . about whether we would ever meet again. I also thought about how desperately I'd needed a pee, ever since I'd listened to the man above. I had, after all, drunk three-quarters of a pint of beer.

I must have fallen asleep, because otherwise I wouldn't have woken up. At first, when I woke up, I couldn't think what had happened. Where was I? I reached out to feel the bedside table, my clock, my note-book kept open in the hope of inspiration. They weren't there, I wasn't at home – and why was I lying on top of my bed dressed in my shirt, trousers and socks? Had I got very drunk somewhere? At Lawrence's and Jane's? Oh God. That would be all Lawrence needed as an excuse to sack me. He hated me. He wanted to replace me with Mallard.

I stretched my arm out and touched something soft. I almost screamed. There was somebody else in the bed. I went rigid with horror. Jane? Had I gone to bed with Lawrence's wife?

I sat bolt upright and remembered. Ange. Room 393. Relief flooded over me, but only for a moment. This wasn't much better. What was I doing lying in my clothes in a hotel bed beside a twenty-four-year old darts groupie who was still in her clothes? Supposing she claimed I'd lured her back to my room and raped her? Shirt-sleeved don in clothed sex horror. He told me to keep my clothes on, and I believed him. We are taking your previous good character into account. Five years.

Would she do such a thing? Could she do such a thing? How could I know? I didn't really know her. She had told me her name was Bedwell. How likely was that? I'd been duped. I will take a lenient view of this case, in view of your extraordinary naïvety. Three years.

Yes, I did know her. I was shocked that I could even think such things. She was sweet. She was pure.

No, she wasn't. She scored bulls' eyes with every darts player known to man. She had also hopped into bed with me on the first night after I'd picked her up on a train.

That phrase – 'picked her up on a train' – shocked me. It shocked me that I could even have thought it. It hadn't been like that.

She was sleeping like a child, so peacefully, so contentedly, so healthily. I wanted to wake her up and talk to her again.

I had no idea what time it was. The curtains were the only things in the room that were of any quality. They were large and thick. It could be mid-morning and the room would still be in complete darkness. I hoped that I would hear noises, movements, which might give me some clue as to what time it was. I began to be convinced that we had missed breakfast, that I should be back in Oxford, that I would be late for supervisions with my students. All this was very disconcerting. I don't wear a watch. I don't need to. I could always tell, almost to the minute, what time it was. It was not a gift I relished. I didn't want to be a slave to the passage of time.

But now, when my gift had deserted me, when a young woman had thrown me into confusion, I felt lost.

Then I remembered that there was a digital clock at Ange's side of the bed. I levered myself up very carefully, not wishing to wake her. There was a red glow in the darkness, but the clock was facing away from me.

I crept out of bed, felt my way round it warily, almost tripped over her shoes, recovered, and reached the clock . . . 3.57. It couldn't be so early. It couldn't. The clock must have stopped. Then it flicked on to 3.58.

I went to the loo, aiming at the side of the bowl so as not to wake her with the noise of water on water. I crept back on to the bed. I knew that I wouldn't get another wink of sleep. Ange was too far over my side. I had no room to get comfortable. I longed to hear her voice, that cockney accent that was much too cheerful and warm and humorous to deserve the adjective 'estuarine'. It was no use. I had to wake her.

I nudged her quite sharply, quite deliberately, with my elbow. She stirred.

'Sorry,' I lied. 'Did I wake you?'

'Bleedin' 'ell. What time is it?'

'Four o'clock.'

'Bleedin' 'ell.'

'Sorry. Ange? Talk some more.'

'Twice in one night? Bleedin' 'ell.'

'I love to hear your voice.'

'Nobody ever said that before.'

'Tell me more about your brothers.'

'What is this, Alan? A relationship or an interview?'

'That's well put, Ange. Very well put.'

'Don't sound so surprised. Stop patronising me.'

'That's a long word for an Essex girl.'

Yes, that's what I said. I find it very difficult to admit it to you, such is my shame.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm very, very sorry. That was very rude and very unfair. I just don't know how to talk to women. Will you forgive me?'

'I don't know what I'm doing here.'

Nor did I, but I couldn't admit that.

'You're here because I asked you, because I think you're lovely, and because I'm a sad old man and I've suddenly realised that I'm very lonely.'

'Don't say you're an old man, Alan, because half the time I forget you are.'

But I'm not. I'm middle-aged. I'm only in the middle of middle age. My doctor told me that fifty-five is the new forty. But Ange thought of me as old. Oh God. There was no future here.

I think she must have realised that she'd upset me, because, when she spoke again, it was with that lovely occasional gentleness of hers.

'You're not an unattractive man, Alan. You must have . . . you know . . . had girlfriends. Haven't you?'

I answered like a politician, and I despised myself. I took refuge in the ghastly pomposity of my calling.

'While it's true, Ange, that I don't consider sexual activity and in particular sexual athletic prowess to be as important as this ruthlessly competitive age seems to believe, at the same time I don't want you to think that there haven't been women in my life. The fact is, though, that – I was trying to work it out while you were sleeping – it's actually twenty-two years now since I last went out with a woman.'

'Bloody Norah.'

'I know. Wasted years, Ange.'

'Tell me about the women you did go out with.'

'You aren't interested.'

'I am. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't. I'm not the sleeping around type, Alan.'

There was a pause, during which I might have said, 'Except with darts players', but at last I showed a bit of sense, and I think she must have guessed this, because she gave me another of her swift,

spontaneous kisses.

‘Tell me about your women,’ she breathed. ‘Alan and his women.’

‘Don’t mock. Well, the one that got away, she was very attractive, was a Swiss lacrosse international I met in Lucerne. I was twenty-four. I was with my parents, but I gave them the slip. I was having a glass of wine in a café beside the river. She was at the next table, waiting for a friend. We got chatting. She did all the talking. Suddenly she suggested we move to another café. She didn’t want to see her friend. We talked there for an hour or two. She was going to be married the following Saturday. She said, “I have – how do you English say it – cold feet.” I said I was in a quandary: I would like to warm her feet, but I didn’t want her to get married so I didn’t want to cure her cold feet.

‘Not the greatest chat-up line in the world, Alan.’

‘No. She gave me her phone number. She said I was very shy but very sweet and she would like to see me again.’

‘Don’t tell me you didn’t ring her.’

‘She was getting married, Ange.’

‘She didn’t want to. You could have married her, swept her off her feet, gone to lacrosse internationals with her, fucked her every time she won. Oh, sorry. I forgot. Language.’

‘I’ve told you. I don’t mind it as a verb. I just find it so tedious as an adjective.’

‘Alan! I wouldn’t know the difference between a verb and an adjective if they jumped up and hit me on the tits. They’re all just words to me. Oh, you should of rung her, Alan.’

‘I was with my parents.’

‘Oh, Alan.’

‘I know. This’ll sound really pathetic. Twenty years later, at least, I was in Geneva for a conference . . .’

‘Bleedin’ ’ell, you get around with these conferences of yours.’

‘Well, occasionally. I do have a bit of a reputation in my field.’

‘You should have taken her to your field and . . .’

‘Yes, yes. We’ve been into all that. Well, anyway, after the conference, I went to Lucerne for a couple of days, hung around, went to the two cafés, which were still there, had this ridiculous fantasy that she’d come in and say, “It was all a dreadful mistake. It was you I loved all the time.” The sad thing is, Ange, that I’ve never grown up.’

‘No, the sad thing is, Alan, that you’ve never realised that you’ve

never grown up.'

I have to be frank with you and admit that I was astounded at the perceptiveness of this. She was a darts groupie, after all, and she came from Gallows Corner. Thank goodness, though, I didn't make any comment to that effect. I was learning fast. I would say that I was learning to think on my feet if it wasn't a rather inappropriate phrase when I was lying in bed.

'Tell me about your other women,' she whispered.

'Well, there was my brief dalliance, lovely neglected word, dalliance, with a florist from Littlehampton.'

'But the affair never blossomed.'

'Don't laugh at me. No, Ange, do. Yes, do laugh at me. I want you to laugh at me. I need to be laughed at.'

'Any more, Casanova?'

'Well, Rachel, of course, and doesn't that "of course" tell you everything? Rachel was a radiologist from Reading. I think the alliteration attracted me as much as anything.'

'But you weren't on the same wavelength.'

'How did you know?'

'It was a joke. Radio, wavelength – and you can't say "Yes, I recognise that as a joke", because you didn't.'

'It was a joke. Our relationship. Except it wasn't funny. We drifted into going out and neither of us had the willpower to end it or the knowledge of how to end it. Rachel hadn't got a sexy bone in her body. There were kisses, fumbings. Neither of us wanted to go any further and neither of us would admit it. It was a nightmare.'

She remained silent. I was really enjoying getting things off my chest in that dark womb of a room, in the middle of that extraordinary night. There are few things more enjoyable than to have a good listener, and I was able to talk about myself with a fluency that perhaps I had never before achieved.

'Anyway, after Rachel, I seemed to decide that I was, if not a natural celibate, at least a natural bachelor. I like college life, the enclosed world of the institution, my book-lined study, Madeira in the senior common room, the cloistered calm broken only by the distant rumble of donnish rivalries. I couldn't see myself helping with the washing up, and emptying the teapot over the lupins, and telling the kiddies all about Tommy the Tortoise. In the modern phrase, or probably the phrase isn't modern at all by the time I got to know about it, it isn't my scene.'

I paused. She didn't reply. I could tell from her breathing that I didn't have a good listener after all. She was fast asleep again.

EIGHT

IN THE MORNING, over breakfast in the hotel's inelegant, self-service restaurant, I told her how much I had enjoyed her company. She didn't say that she had enjoyed my company, but she didn't say that she hadn't. My main feeling actually was of awe for her appetite. She ate eggs, bacon, sausages, fried bread, hash browns, baked beans, tomatoes, and mushrooms, and she was so slim.

I found even my meagre repast of muesli and fruit salad hard to swallow, so nervous was I of the question that would have to be asked, even though I dreaded the answer. I tried to make it sound like a casual enquiry of no great importance to me, but my nervousness revealed to me, and probably to her, that it was already more vital than I would have believed possible.

'Shall we do it again some time?'

'We didn't do it this time.'

I frowned.

'Sorry. I'm crude, Alan. I'm an Essex girl.'

'You know what I meant. Shall we meet again? I'd like to.'

'Why?'

'Does there have to be a reason?'

'I thought giving reasons was what your philosophy was all about.'

'Fair enough. Yes, there is a reason. I like you. I'm attracted to you, however unlikely that may seem when I left all my clothes on. I've enjoyed being with you. I want to see you again. You liven me up. I believe you can make me happy. Are those enough reasons for you?'

She took a forkful of hash brown and baked beans and spoke through them, which I didn't like. I might have to speak to her about that one day.

'Tell you what,' she said. 'I'd like to see you in your natural surroundings. In your college. That'd be a laugh.'

That I hadn't expected. That I hadn't wanted to do. I wanted to keep her entirely secret, meet her only on neutral territory. She

didn't want that. She wouldn't accept that. She had outmanoeuvred me. I admired that.

We arranged for her to come to Oxford on the following Tuesday.

I felt so happy as my train slid slowly out of Paddington Station, I wanted to tell the whole carriage that I had spent the night with a delightful young woman, but by the time we passed the massive cooling towers of Didcot my euphoria had gone. I was returning to reality. I would spend the afternoon with an old woman whom nobody could describe as delightful. It was my day for visiting my mother.

My mother's room was on the first floor. It wasn't small, but it was too full of furniture. She had brought with her two armchairs and a coffee table. Their elegance served only to emphasise the cheapness of the institutional bed, the rickety dining table, the two hard chairs, the shabby wardrobe, the bulky commode. She always used the commode now, saying that she could no longer get to the lavatory, but I think the real reason was that she had a horror of lavatory seats: you could catch things off them. She was high on the list for a room with a lavatory. Only two residents needed to die, so it wouldn't be long – but it wouldn't surprise me if, after complaining about her room for nine years, she would refuse to move from it. She had always been stubborn, and in old age she had become contrary.

It was stifling in the room, and there was just a faint lingering smell from her earlier use of the commode.

'Hello, Mother.'

Peck on the cheek. No warmth. It would be better to skip it, really, but we can't. We are locked into the gesture.

I had never loved my mother. Did I dare I tell Ange that? Would she think me a monster? I had never loved my mother because she had never given me a chance to love her, because she had never loved me.

I lifted the cake from the carrier bag.

I always took her a cake. Cakes were her weakness. In the past I had occasionally taken flowers, but she had always found fault: 'You know I don't like irises'; 'You shouldn't bring anything blue, Alan. This room can't take blue.' Cakes were safer. There are very few blue cakes.

'I've brought you a cake, Mother. Coffee cream.'

‘Thank you. Very nice, though I prefer chocolate.’

Even cake is not entirely safe.

‘How are you?’

Once I had made a big mistake. I had said, ‘How are we?’ and she had said, ‘Oh, not you as well. I am not half-witted, Alan. I do not have to be pluralised. Your father would hate to hear you say that.’

My father had been dead for twelve years at the time.

‘Oh, mustn’t grumble,’ she said. ‘I’ll get no visitors if I grumble, will I? Not that I get many anyway.’

‘You get me.’

‘Occasionally.’

‘Mother, I come every week.’

Every week for the nine long years in which she has been in the home, clinging on to a life that she no longer enjoys.

‘I should hope so. You know I can’t go out.’

Mother is full of bitterness. She is angry with the God she has worshipped all her life for not sparing her from old age. She is angry with the University for not having a select home for the elderly relatives of dons. She is angry with my father for dying. She is angry with me for delivering to her only the meagre harvest that she has sown.

‘Margaret comes once a month.’

‘It’s very kind of her, but I’m so relieved when she’s gone. She *will* bend over very close to me to emphasise things, and she has very bad breath. I suppose it’s cruel of me to say that, but if I can’t speak the truth when I’m eighty-seven, when can I?’

After a brief pause, I moved on to safer ground.

‘So what did you have for lunch?’

That is about as near as we get to intellectual curiosity in our conversations.

‘We had pork.’

‘Oh, very nice.’

Contrast that with my saying ‘We’ll see if it is’ when the waiter said, ‘Very good, sir.’ I was not, when I was at the home, the Alan I was in L’Escargot Bleu. I was not really Alan at all when I was with my mother. I was a shadow. If I could have sent a hologram of me, I would have, and she wouldn’t have noticed.

‘Well, it wasn’t too bad, I suppose, but the apple sauce tasted synthetic.’

I found it interesting that my mother used the word ‘synthetic’.

Little did she know that Kant, my hero, the author of *Critique of Pure Reason*, which I regarded as the best work on philosophy ever written, had created a very famous phrase, and one that had great importance in the development of what can loosely be called modern philosophy – synthetic a priori knowledge. The process of synthesis was a vital element in linguistic and moral philosophy – in fact, I was trying to suggest, in my book, that it had to be a German who invented that phrase, because Germans were the most thorough people on earth. Enough of that. My point is that the process of synthesising, the putting together of separate parts to form a complex whole, is by definition complex, and is a very advanced process in the world of thought. Then it came into the world of chemistry and of materials. We learnt to talk of clothes made of synthetic material. This material was created by experts and for good reasons. It was held to be superior to the simple natural materials. It used knowledge in order to make improvements. However, the word began to mean ‘unreal’, ‘unnatural’, ‘artificial’. A word associated with high intellectual activity had gradually become pejorative, hence my mother’s use of it to describe her apple sauce.

Why did I write that passage? To show you just how little of the real me was presented to my mother, how vast was the distance between us as we sat so close together in that stale hothouse. I said none of this to her. All I said was ‘And to follow?’

‘What?’

‘What did you have to follow? After the pork?’

She looked at me strangely.

‘Alan, that was several minutes ago. You haven’t spoken for several minutes. Are you all right?’

‘Of course I’m all right, Mother. I was thinking.’

‘Oh. That.’

I think my mother believed that philosophy was a childish aberration that I would eventually grow out of, like a passion for horses in young girls. I don’t think she considered that I was fifty-five. The only fact that mattered about my age was that I was thirty-two years younger than she was. I didn’t think she really believed that she was eighty-seven. That was why she told me so often that she was.

‘I know I can’t be much fun for you but if you take the trouble to come you might at least say something occasionally.’

‘Sorry, Mother. I’m a bit tired.’

A mistake. A tactical error.

‘Why? Didn’t you sleep well?’

I couldn’t tell her that I had spent most of the night talking to a 24-year-old darts groupie in a cheap hotel room in London. Everything that happened in my life became just one more piece of evasion. The more I saw my mother, the greater was the gap between us. The more I saw Ange, the greater the chasm would become.

There weren’t many questions I could dredge up when visiting my mother, so I had to be careful not to waste even one of them. With any luck ‘What did you have to follow?’ might yield a couple of minutes of peace while she described the inadequacy of her pudding, so I asked again now, ‘So what did you have to follow?’

‘Oh, apple tart and ice cream. I know I’m old-fashioned, but I think it’s very common to serve ice cream with apple tart. It should be cream.’

The day my mother didn’t find fault with something would be the day she died.

I hated her use of the word ‘common’. I made the mistake of telling her so on one occasion, and after that she used it more frequently.

I told her about my trip to Manchester. I told her that my lecture had gone down well and that it had attracted quite a large audience. It was true, but in the face of her lack of response it came out sounding like boasting.

‘I thought of stopping off in London, but I decided not to. I hate London,’ I lied. I didn’t enjoy telling lies and as I told this whopper I sighed – another tactical mistake.

‘I know these visits are painful to you, but you needn’t make it so obvious,’ said my mother. ‘I can’t help being dull. I can’t help being eighty-seven. I didn’t ask to be eighty-seven. I didn’t ask to sit here alone all week.’

I couldn’t let this go.

‘Mother,’ I said through gritted teeth. ‘You wouldn’t be alone all day if you took your meals downstairs with the others.’

‘I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t bear to watch that Purkiss woman using her knife and fork wrongly.’

‘Mrs Purkiss has dementia, Mother.’

‘She used her knife and fork wrongly before she had dementia.’

Mrs Purkiss's real crime, in my mother's eyes, was not her dementia but her living in Cowley. Mrs Purkiss was lower class.

So my mother took her meals on her own, and sat on her own, except for a smelly hour with her friend Margaret once a month, and two hours with me week after week after week after week after week.

At last I felt that I had been there long enough. A quick peck, and out I walked into the glorious fresh air of a wonderful world that contained Oxford, and Gallows Corner, and Ange.

Would she come next Tuesday? I realised that I had escaped from the tense atmosphere in my mother's room to face six whole days of even greater tension.

She came. I met her at Oxford Station. Her hair had been done all spiky, she was wearing jeans and that awful Townsend Tissues T-shirt. She wasn't going to get a drink at the Randolph and we wouldn't be going down the road for dinner at Le Manoir aux Quatre Saisons.

We had a quick kiss, a bit gauche on her part as well as mine, but I had the impression that she was really pleased to see me.

There was quite a long wait for the taxi, and I was worried that somebody I knew would see her, but when I didn't see anybody I knew I was disappointed. How ridiculous.

The taxi driver was Eastern European, and I could see that he was disgruntled because the journey was so short.

'I'm not going to be dropped in Chipping Camden just so that you can get rich,' I said.

As we entered Paternoster Quad, which is one of the most beautiful quads in all Oxford, she said, 'Blimey. Is this your gaff?' and linked her arm through mine. I felt quite proud, also very embarrassed and rather annoyed at being manipulated. For years I had felt no emotions at all. Now I was being swamped with contradictory ones.

We passed a group of students whom I didn't know, but they must have known who I was, and they couldn't hide their astonishment. One of the older dons, Damien Finch, tried to keep the astonishment out of his famed mellifluous voice as he said 'Good evening, Alan. Isn't the light stunning?' He paused in his stride, forcing me to say, 'Damien, I don't think you've met Ange Bedwell, have you?'

'No indeed, I have not had that pleasure,' he twinkled. 'How do

you do?’

‘Hiya,’ said Ange.

I led her up the stone staircase to my rooms on the second floor, and opened the heavy oak door. I was immediately conscious of the smell, a mixture of dust and books and age and socks and celibacy. Two sides of the room were lined with bookshelves. A large table was piled with books and papers. There were more papers on an antique desk. There was a window seat under which yet more books were stowed. Two leather armchairs and an occasional table formed the tiny bit of the room that was for social purposes.

‘Bleedin’ ’ell,’ she said. ‘All them books.’

‘I’ve got lots more that there isn’t room for. Sherry?’

‘I’d rather a beer.’

‘Beer. Yes, of course. I got some in.’

I found her a beer. As I poured it I said, ‘You got time off work, then?’

‘Up to me, innit? I’m a temp.’

I nodded, as if to suggest that I knew what a temp was, but it wasn’t easy to fool this girl.

‘You don’t know what a temp is, do you?’

‘Not exactly, no.’

‘You don’t know nothink, do you?’

‘It’s beginning to look that way. Me and Socrates.’

‘A temp’s someone who’s booked through an agency and works for a firm temporarily. That means I can take days off when I want to. I do a bit as a barmaid down the Black Bull as well, when that old bag who hates me isn’t doing the lunches. I can’t get over all these books. Tax dodge, are they?’

‘They’re my most treasured possessions. They’re my life. Do you read books at all?’

‘Funnily enough, I do. I like a good read. On trains, etcetera . . . red books.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I read books with red covers. Well, the way I look at it, I don’t know much about books, right? I wouldn’t know if I was going to like a book or not till I’d read it, and then it’s too late not to read it cos you’ve already read it. So I read books with red covers cos they look bright, right? It usually turns out OK. I reckon it’s as good as any other way.’

‘So you take the dust jackets off to see what colour they are, do

you?’

‘No, cos I don’t buy books. Can’t afford to, can I? I borrow them from the library.’

‘Go on. Don’t stop. I like listening to you.’

‘What is all this listening lark? Are you taking the mickey?’

‘No. Honestly.’

‘Nobody ever wanted me for my mind before.’

‘You see, Ange, I am becoming increasingly aware of the limits of my awareness. I am wearying of the burden of my increasing knowledge of my ignorance. The more I think, the more aware I become of the validity of more and more arguments against what I think.’

As I stood by the window of my rooms, nutty dry sherry in hand, I was all too aware that I was pontificating again, even if I was pontificating about the difficulty I had in pontificating. I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t. It was the only kind of conversation I knew.

‘More and more qualifications occur to me. Sometimes so many aspects of a subject occur to me, and those aspects have so many interdependencies, and all these aspects and interdependencies are subject to so many qualifications of increasing complexity which in turn are subject to further qualifications of even greater complexity – and I am trying to simplify this – that in the end it becomes very hard for me to finish a sentence. This is happening to my Ferdinand Brinsley Memorial Lecture. Is it not therefore becoming inordinately long, you may well ask.’

I have to say that it didn’t look as if she would ask me that. She was looking at me but I had no idea whether she was concentrating. I was unstoppable now. I was in full lecturer mode. Oh dear.

‘No, because the more qualifications that I make, the more impossible it becomes to say anything at all. I’ve already crossed out whole sections. The longer I work at it, the shorter it becomes. The culmination of my career, my very final lecture perhaps, will consist of an hour’s total silence, warmly applauded by any students bright enough to appreciate the hard road that led to that silence.’

I turned to look her in the eye and began to speak about her, and, as I did so, I could sense a warmth coming into my voice, a warmth to which I was quite unaccustomed and which seemed to me to take the curse off my donnish tones.

‘But you’re not like that, Ange, you’re not limited or conditioned by what has gone before or what’ll come after, by what other

people have thought or will think. You're fresh, original, unselfconscious. You live and think for the day. That is pure. That is beautiful. That is what I want. Talk some more.'

There was a moment's silence, quite a long moment.

'Tell you what,' she said. 'I couldn't half knock a hole in a curry.'

She didn't half knock a hole in a curry. Her appetite was prodigious. We strolled back arm-in-arm. I tried to look small and unobtrusive as we slipped past the Porters' Lodge. A crescent moon rose over the gabled roofs of Paternoster Quad. Ange drew in her breath and said, 'Fuck me, Alan. Fancy living here.' I made a mental note to stop taking it for granted.

When Ange said 'Fuck me' she was expressing surprise, not issuing an instruction. It is just as well that she wasn't issuing an instruction. You are entitled to wonder why I knew that I couldn't take advantage of this amazing opportunity to lose the secret shame of my virginity. I don't know that I can fully explain it. There was fear, yes, that was natural, given my inexperience, but I don't think it was a crippling fear. I don't think that I expected to be unable to perform, although I had no way of telling whether I would be any good at it. I had in fact felt a pretty fair erection in the middle of my lamb biryani. There was embarrassment at the thought of my middle-aged body against her young one, but not so much, because after all I did eventually . . . but I anticipate. The whole question of the difference in our ages was an obstacle, but not one that couldn't be scaled, or we would never . . . but again I anticipate . . . I mustn't rush this. And that was an element too. I didn't want to rush things. To wait fifty-five years and then be in a hurry, it wouldn't be seemly. Also, I didn't think my cramped bed in my college rooms was the right place for something so momentous – and, yes, intercourse would have been momentous for me, if not for her! No, I was a respected and respectable figure here, an upholder of values. Yet, on its own, in the twenty-first century, that also was hardly a sufficient reason.

The truth, I think, is that each of these considerations contributed in part for what may seem to you to be my extraordinary behaviour, but if there was any one real reason, it was this. My life was concerned with meaning, with defining meanings and finding meanings. My relationship with Ange had not yet become sufficiently meaningful, and for me, a committed philosopher, there

could be nothing without meaning, and, above all, nothing as important as a sexual relationship without meaning. And that, I hope you will agree, is a reason more flattering to my dignity than the others.

So it was that we lay, for a second night, fully clothed beside each other upon a bed, and talked. We talked quietly. I didn't want the people in the rooms above and below to hear us, although nocturnal talk was the very stuff of Oxford life and we would not have been likely to attract much attention. We talked and snoozed and talked and slept and talked.

'Ange?' I whispered as our high pitched college clock, known the world over as Little Nelly, chimed four o'clock.

'What?'

'Are you asleep?'

'I was.'

'Talk to me.'

'Oh, Gawd, not again. We've talked three times already.'

'Talk to me again.'

'I can't. I feel like a performing seal. I'm self-conscious.'

'Nonsense. You're never self-conscious. It's one of the things I like about you.'

'No, but you make me feel self-conscious, keeping on telling me I'm not self-conscious.'

'It's only two thousand six hundred years since logic was invented. Not much more than a hundred since evolution was discovered. Even less than that since the internal combustion engine. Since then the aeroplane, nuclear energy, space travel, silicon chips, the internet. The process is getting faster and faster and we can't control it. Soon people will be capable of living to be three hundred. Some doctors say that the first person to live to be a thousand has already been born. The ultimate irony of our catastrophic species is that we have the capacity to solve all our problems and the very fact that we can solve them will destroy us. Philosophers, mathematicians and scientists have combined to ensure that the most advanced species ever known on this planet will have a very brief spell of life indeed. But if everyone was like you, Ange, going around playing darts, living for the day, idly wondering if birds are frightened of heights, mankind could go on for ever.'

But Ange was asleep again, and this time I didn't wake her.

In the morning I felt like a gay old stick, in the old, deeply lamented meaning of the word 'gay'. (I don't mean that I am anti-gay. I am anti calling gay gay, that's all.) I even felt a touch of pride, mixed with the usual inevitable embarrassment, when my scout, as we call the people who look after us and our rooms, arrived.

As luck would have it, our paths on the way out again crossed that of Damien Finch.

Damien knows that I am jealous of his success on the television screen. Nobody has ever asked me on to it, but his voice is his fortune.

Damien's wonderfully expressive televisual eyebrows rose just the tiniest bit as he saw us emerging from my rooms.

'Good morrow, Alan. Good morrow, Miss Bedwell,' he said.

Ange smiled cheerfully and said 'Hiya.' Did she know that she would be the talk of the college, I wondered.

I showed her round the fine old heart of the city. We strolled along Broad Street and down Cattle Street, where the city really does attain true greatness. I showed her the Sheldonian Theatre, the grandeur of the Bodleian Library, the Radcliffe Camera, the University Church and Hawksmoor's masterly eighteenth-century Great Quadrangle at All Souls College. I had decided that it no longer mattered who saw us. She couldn't judge the age of the buildings – when I told her she said, 'Jesus! So old, and they haven't none of them fallen down!' – but I was delighted to discover that she appreciated just how beautiful they were, gawping and gasping with unselfconscious delight, even though her way of expressing her admiration was unusual to my ears. 'Bleedin' 'ell,' she said. 'Look at all them pineapples and pinnacles and stuff. Look at all them domes and towers and spires. They put something on top of everything in the olden days, didn't they?' – and I have to admit that I hadn't quite thought of it like that, but it was true. Everything was topped by something, and sometimes by many things. I explained that this would have looked vulgar if it hadn't been accompanied by strict respect for classical forms and proportions, and she looked and then nodded and said, 'Yeah.'

I was amused by her attitude to members of the public. If she saw anybody remotely unusual or unkempt she would say, 'Is he a great intellectual?' or even 'Is he a genius? He looks like it.' I had to tell her that one of her supposed genii was the manager of Boots, but I

loved her enthusiasm for all things Oxfordian. Oh, how I revelled in it.

We strolled along the great sweep of the High, with its uplifting mixture of good university and domestic buildings. She laughed at a notice that said 'Thank you for smoking' in the window of a tobacconist's. I turned us round just before we got to Magdalen. I didn't want to take her on to Magdalen Bridge. The sight of the punts would have given her an idea, and I have never punted. I was put off the whole idea when a friend invited a keen bird-watcher or 'twitcher' to Oxford. The twitcher stood up to look at a dabchick through his binoculars. They were approaching a low bridge. My friend screamed 'Duck.' 'Where? Where?' cried the excited twitcher, just before he was knocked into the water. He was in hospital for five months. No, I didn't punt.

We had a pub lunch, and I confess that I chose a hostelry not frequented by the university. She had three pints of lager and lasagne and chips. I had a glass of dry white wine and a starter portion of home-made salmon fishcake. I don't know which home it was made in, but from the taste, or rather the lack of it, I suspect it might have been an old people's. Then I took her to the station. I was heavy of heart. I knew that things couldn't go on as they were. This relationship had to develop or die. I didn't know if I was capable of developing it, but I knew that I didn't want it to die. Anxious days lay ahead.

'When will I see you again?' I asked nervously, on the crowded platform.

'You've got my number.'

'Do you want to see me again?'

'You've got my number,' she repeated.

That was all she was prepared to say, and she didn't want me to wait for the train.

'I hate goodbyes, Alan. They do my head in.'

'I don't like them either.'

I walked away, then turned. She was looking at me. She gave me a tiny smile, full of warmth and affection, but brief and a bit forlorn. Then she turned away.

When I got back to my rooms they seemed dreadfully empty. I had three students' essays to read before Friday's supervisions. I began to read one of them, but it made no sense at all. I wondered whether this was the student's fault or mine. Then the phone rang.

‘Alan, could you just pop over and bring me up to speed about the Ferdinand Brinsley?’

It was Lawrence, my Head of Department, second-rate brain, good administrator, gourmet, sex-maniac, author of some of the world’s worst detective stories, and creep. I didn’t like his tone.

‘Come and have a spot of supper.’

It was always ‘a spot of supper’ with Lawrence, even if it was a four-course meal. I think he had read somewhere that informal was the new sexy.

‘Come at seven and we’ll have a noggin.’

It was always ‘a noggin’ with Lawrence, whether it was a glass of cider or a bottle of champagne. He imagined that he had the popular touch.

‘Jane says we haven’t seen you for far too long.’

I maintained a diplomatic silence on that one.

‘Besides, we have something to ask you.’

They had been told about Ange. Bloody Damien Finch.

NINE

I DECIDED TO go by car, so that I couldn't get drunk. I was worried that if I was cross-examined about Ange in drink, I might say something I'd regret. It was almost a ten minute walk to my garage – a minor inconvenience of Oxford life. As I drove my old Saab to their pleasant detached house in the leafy suburbs of North Oxford I felt a certain trepidation. I wasn't ready for Ange's existence to invade my whole life.

'Kierkegaard' is a very pleasant house with a labour-saving front garden of gravel and pseudo-Grecian urns. Lawrence led me in, indicated to me to sit down, and flung himself on to the settee. Then he said, 'Forgot the noggin', and leapt up athletically. He does this sort of thing to remind me that he's twelve years younger than me.

He broached a bottle of Pinot Grigio. There is an element of drama in everything he does. He doesn't just open bottles. He broaches them.

I realise that I ought to give you some kind of picture of Lawrence and Jane's sitting room. It isn't easy for me. You may have already suspected that I am not a very observant person, but I will have to try because we will be visiting it several times, unfortunately.

The first thing to say about it is that it *was* a sitting room. Jane thought the term 'drawing room' old-fashioned, and people who called it a 'lounge' were struck off the Christmas card list. It was furnished with an eclectic mix of old and new. I suppose I would place it at the elegant end of twee. Jane is precious. Some of her many ornaments are also precious, others merely look as if they are. The paintings were carefully experimental, at the safe end of abstract.

'How's the lecture coming along?' asked Lawrence. The question seemed casual, but he is actually as casual as a wolf.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I was discussing it the other day, with a friend, and it suddenly seemed terribly feeble.'

This remark was a bad error of judgment on my part. It gave me a moment of satisfaction – it's always a joy to see Lawrence worried –

but the cost was too great. The last thing I ought to have done was to sow doubts in Lawrence's mind. Things that are sown in Lawrence's mind grow slowly but remorselessly, and are harvested in due course. Soon it would be the combine harvester for my career, if I wasn't careful – and as for sorting out the wheat from the chaff, we won't even go down that road.

'Oh dear,' he said. 'Oh, Alan. There was a lot of pressure on me to give it to young Mallard. If it's good, we can clip young Mallard's wings, but, if it's bad, feather in young Mallard's cap. In our department, Alan, there are Calcutt men, but there are also Mallard men. I shouldn't say this. I should be neutral. Young Mallard has ability, but he isn't ready. I am a Calcutt man through and through, but young Mallard will not fly away. I don't want you giving any fuel to the Mallard men. Make it good, Alan.'

I have to say that I wasn't utterly convinced by Lawrence's championing of me.

I didn't like the way he never mentioned Mallard without giving him his adjective – 'young'.

I realised, of course that 'How's the lecture coming on?' was not the question that Lawrence had mentioned on the phone. He had said, 'We have something to ask you.' It would await the arrival of Jane, and it would be about Ange.

Jane entered now, and I have to admit that she looked wonderful. She was wearing a stunning Max Mara outfit. How did I of all people know that it was a Max Mara outfit? Surely I didn't know anything about ladies' clothes and designer labels? I knew because in the course of the evening she told me twice. She was wearing outlandishly trendy scarlet high-heeled shoes, which were probably not as expensive as they looked since she didn't tell me what make they were. They showed off her slender legs to perfection. Her worst enemy – and it would be hard to decide who that was, there were so many candidates – couldn't deny that she was a very attractive woman. She would be truly beautiful if she had warmth.

'Alan dear.'

She offered both cheeks. I kissed them demurely.

'Everything hunky-dory in the cassoulet department?' asked Lawrence.

'It's in the oven.'

'Excellent.'

'Have you asked him?'

‘Mmm?’

‘You know.’

‘Oh. Yes. No. I was waiting for you.’

‘Ah.’

I waited patiently during this minimalist exchange.

‘No, Alan,’ said Lawrence. ‘Jane was most intrigued.’ As if he wasn’t. ‘Arthur Holdall said he saw you leaving the New Star of Bengal Indian restaurant with a young lady.’

So I had been wrong to blame Damien. Funnily enough, I was glad of that. I like the man, despite my jealousy.

I had no idea what to say. My reply, when it came, was as unexpected to me as it was to Lawrence and Jane.

‘Oh, Arthur Holdall,’ I said. ‘He’s a case.’

‘A case?’

‘It’s a joke.’

‘Don’t change the subject,’ said Jane coolly.

‘Yes, please, Alan, answer the question,’ said Lawrence.

‘I haven’t been asked a question yet,’ I said.

I sat down in one of their enormous chairs, stretched my legs out, tried to look comfortable, and sipped my Pinot Grigio as elegantly as I could manage.

‘Well I said that Arthur Holdall said that he saw you coming out of the New Star of Bengal Indian restaurant with a young lady.’

‘I would have expected the Head of a Department of Philosophy at Oxford University to know that that is a statement, not a question.’

I smiled, desperately hoping that I looked relaxed about this. In truth I hated it. I didn’t want anything about Ange to be mixed up with the lives of these two people.

‘Oh for goodness sake.’ Lawrence had quite a short fuse. ‘Did Arthur Holdall see you coming out of the New Star of Bengal Indian restaurant with a young lady?’

‘How can I know what Arthur Holdall saw or did not see? You would have to ask him.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake. Did you visit the New Star of Bengal Indian Restaurant with a young lady?’

I smiled. I hoped my smile was both calm and infuriating.

‘Yes, I did,’ I admitted, ‘and I did leave it, otherwise I’d still be there, which I demonstrably am not.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake, Alan,’ said Jane, echoing her husband.

‘Stop evading the issue. Who was she?’

‘She was a friend. Do I need to tell you more than that? You can probably find it out on the internet, anyway. Put in New Star of Bengal, you’ll probably find a list of all the people who ate there last night, and what we all had. There are no secrets any more. There’s no such thing as a private life any more.’

‘Of course you don’t need to tell us any more,’ said Lawrence, ‘but we’re your friends. We’re your supporters. We’re Calcutt men . . . and women. We know you. I’ve known you for . . . it must be . . . oh . . . eighteen years. In all that time you have never once been seen alone with a woman. Now we hear this. Naturally, as people interested in our fellow human beings, we are intrigued. Can you blame us?’

‘No, I can’t blame you, I suppose. What do you want to know?’

Lawrence came over and filled my glass.

‘Well, where did you meet?’

‘I picked her up on a train.’

It was amusing to watch their reactions. A trifle irritating too. They both looked incredulous. Jane also looked disapproving. Lawrence, I felt, had a touch of envy.

‘Alan! Congratulations!’ he said.

Jane raised her eyebrows in disapproval of Lawrence’s enthusiasm. I wondered if he had once picked someone up on a train, and Jane knew about it. I knew he wasn’t faithful. I didn’t know if Jane knew.

‘Is she a philosopher?’ she asked.

‘Not professionally.’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘That’s good, Alan. I approve of that.’

I don’t think I could ever hit a woman, but, if I did, it would be Jane. What business was it of hers to approve or disapprove?

‘What’s her name?’ asked Lawrence.

I had dreaded this moment. Now that it had arrived I decided that my best tactic was to revel in it, deliver the ghastly information in two parts, enjoy their horror.

‘Bedwell,’ I said.

Lawrence looked amused, but Jane merely looked thoughtful.

‘Bedwell,’ she repeated. ‘Does she have people in Harforshire?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘She doesn’t have people in “Harforshire”.’ I mocked Jane’s pronunciation of what I call Hertfordshire, but the mockery went over her head. ‘She has people in Gallows Corner.’

‘Gallows Corner?’ said Lawrence incredulously. ‘Where’s that?’
‘Romford.’

‘Good God. Jane, I do believe Alan has picked up an Essex girl. You dark horse, you.’

I’d had enough of this. I really do think that if I hadn’t known how good Jane’s cassoulets were, I would have walked out. But maybe I wouldn’t. I couldn’t afford to offend Lawrence. Oh God, to be rich and not beholden to people. Nobody was free unless they were rich, and people who became rich rarely cared about freedom. And, to be honest, I was in no position to be upset with Lawrence for his crack about Essex girls. I had done it myself, in fact I was finding it very difficult not to think of Ange as an Essex girl, and of course it was the realisation, when he did it, of how offensive I had been that really angered me. We are rarely as angry with other people as we are with ourselves.

‘So does she have a Christian name?’ he asked.

‘Yes, she does. It’s Ange.’

There was a moment of silence.

‘Ange?’ said Jane incredulously. Few people can be as incredulous as Jane. ‘Ange?’

‘Ange.’

‘Oh.’

‘Bring this “Ange” for a spot of supper tomorrow night,’ said Lawrence.

Jane flashed him a filthy look.

‘I have Daphne’s coffee morning, and my bridge group in the afternoon,’ she said. ‘I won’t have time to make supper.’

‘We can have the cassoulet again. You’ll have made mountains. You always do.’

Jane glared again.

‘Cassoulet two days running will give me . . .’ She coloured, and stopped.

Lawrence was not so delicate – deliberately, I’m sure.

‘A touch of wind, however unfeminine and regrettable it may be in one so perfect, is hardly a serious reason for not meeting my friend and colleague’s girlfriend,’ he said.

It was time to stop this nonsense.

‘No. Really,’ I said. ‘She . . . she doesn’t like cassoulet.’

‘How many times have you been out with her?’ asked Jane icily.

‘Twice.’

‘And you’ve already discussed the matter? How very strange. Cassoulet crops up so seldom in casual conversation.’

‘We haven’t discussed it specifically,’ I said, ‘not in so many words, but we’ve talked about food, and our likes and dislikes and so on, and I’ve formed the impression, the very strong impression, that she’s not the cassoulet type.’

‘Well bring her for a noggin.’

‘No.’

‘Alan,’ said Jane. ‘I believe you’re ashamed of her.’

‘By God, I will bring her,’ I said.

Why do I always seem to be outmanoeuvred?

TEN

NEXT MORNING I had a slight problem. I had said that I would take Ange to Lawrence and Jane's, but she was back in Gallows Corner. I didn't want to take her, I regretted the flash of pride and affection that had led me to respond to Jane's suggestion that I was ashamed of her with such uncharacteristic spirit, but now that I had been inveigled into agreeing to take her, I felt that I couldn't climb down without looking weak. I couldn't afford to look weak to Lawrence, not with young Mallard waiting impatiently in the wings. Oh God! I was calling him 'young' Mallard in my thoughts now.

I would imagine that many young women in Ange's position would have dreaded visiting Lawrence and Jane for a noggin, but I already knew her well enough to know that she would be most offended if I tried to hide her away. The very thing that most attracted me to her, her sense of pride, was the thing that made her most difficult for me.

All in all, it would be better to get the visit to Lawrence and Jane's over quickly, and on a night when it would have to be brief because Jane was too busy to cook a meal.

So now I had to phone her in Gallows Corner. I waited till nine o'clock. I didn't want to wake her up.

'Hello.'

It was a female voice but it didn't sound like her.

'Is that Ange?'

'It's her mother. She's at work.'

'Oh. Could I have the number, please?'

I felt very uneasy, talking to her mother.

'Why do you want to speak to her?'

I didn't know what to say. I knew that, whatever I said, I would say it so hesitantly that I wouldn't be believed. I was breaking out into a light sweat of embarrassment. The conversation was bringing home the impossibility of the situation. I should ring off, cancel the noggin, grow up, and forget.

I couldn't.

'I'm a friend. We've been invited somewhere for a drink this evening, and I want to tell her.'

I was desperately trying to make my voice sound younger. It wasn't working.

'They don't like her getting phone calls at work.'

Give up, Alan.

No. You've given up too often. You haven't lived. Don't ever give up again.

'Well, could you ring her and tell her I rang and maybe she could ring me? Say it's Alan.'

'Alan who?'

How many Alans were there in her life? Somehow I felt very reluctant to give my surname, but if I had to . . .

'Calcutt.'

'Does she have your phone number?'

'I've given it to her, but that isn't quite the same thing, is it?'

I gave her mother my phone number. I won't tell you what it is, if you don't mind, just in case some of you sell double glazing.

And then I sat at home. I tried to concentrate on the Ferdinand Brinsley. To be honest, I no longer believed that 'chance' was a strong enough subject. It was meant to be lighthearted, but you can only be light-hearted successfully about serious and important things. I wondered about giving up on it. Did it really matter to me any more if young Mallard did it?

The phone burst into life, giving me a bit of a shock in my overwrought state.

'Hello.'

'Who am I speaking to?' asked the caller.

'I don't answer calls that begin like that. If I am being phoned, it is I who should ask who's speaking, not you. Now piss off and get a proper job.'

I never gave my name when calls began like that, but I wasn't usually so rude. Usually I felt sorry for the person having to make what I believe are called 'cold calls'. Not that morning. I slammed the phone down, then lifted it to see if I'd broken it. How stupid would that have been?

Maybe I should forget the Ferdinand Brinsley for a while, and go back to 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein'.

My heart felt almost as heavy as my manuscript. I opened it at the first page.

‘I shall endeavour to show that there was something essentially Germanic behind the thought processes of all the German and Austrian philosophers, that they could not have thought what they thought if they had not thought it in the German language.’

The phone rang.

‘I’ve got your silage.’

‘What?’

‘Your silage. It’s ready.’

‘You’re speaking to an Oxford don.’

‘Not Fred Bullstrode?’

‘Not Fred Bullstrode.’

‘Oh. You won’t want my silage then?’

‘No. Sorry.’

I didn’t believe the premise that I was trying to illustrate. My whole book, all 527 pages and I had only got as far as Nietzsche, was based upon a premise in which I no longer believed. I would have to start again. I had wasted fourteen years.

The phone shrilled into life.

‘Hello.’

‘Hello, Alan. It’s your mother.’

‘Oh, hello, Mother.’

‘Why didn’t you come yesterday?’

Oh my God. OH . . . MY . . . GOD. For the first time in nine years, I had forgotten to go and see my mother on a Wednesday. I’d had lunch in a pub with Ange and walked her to the station and forgotten all about it.

‘I wasn’t well. I had food poisoning.’

‘You don’t wash your hands properly.’

‘Mother, I do wash my hands properly. Somebody else will have not washed their hands properly and infected the food.’

‘Why didn’t you phone?’

‘I felt too ill.’

‘You felt too ill to let your mother, your only mother, know that you weren’t coming. You’re cross with me. What have I done wrong?’

‘You say “your only mother” as if you’re a special case. Everyone only has one mother, Mother.’

‘What have I done to upset you?’

‘You haven’t upset me, Mother.’

‘Are you coming today?’

Oh God.

'I'll come tomorrow.'

'Not today?'

'Not today. Tomorrow.'

'Your father always said that tomorrow never comes, and nor do you.'

'I do. I come every week. Look, this is a bad moment. I'm expecting an important phone call.'

'A phone call from your mother isn't remotely important of course.'

'It's very important and I'll ring you back.'

'I'm eighty-seven.'

'I know that, Mother.'

'I'll be eighty-eight in October.'

'I know that, mother.'

'It'll be nine days between visits. That's a long time when you're eighty-eight.'

She was eighty-eight already, it seemed.

'Yes, but look on the bright side, after tomorrow, it'll only be five days till my next visit.'

'You'll be eighty-eight one day.'

'Not if I have many phone calls like this.'

'Well! I *have* offended you. I'm sure I don't know what I've done.'

'You haven't done anything. Goodbye now, Mother.'

Oh God.

Ange rang at ten past one, by which time I had decided to abandon not only the Ferdinand Brinsley, but also 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein'. My whole life was in ashes.

'Hello.'

'It's me.'

'Hello!'

'I had to wait till my lunch hour. They don't like people phoning. What is it? Mum was garbled.'

'You don't sound very friendly.'

'I like you, Alan, but I don't want to be pestered. I don't want to be pursued.'

'I know. I know. I'm not. There is a reason.'

I explained the reason.

'You want me to meet your boss and his wife?'

'Well, not if you don't want to.'

Please, Ange, don't want to.

'You're happy with that?'

No, but I daren't tell you that. You're so prickly.

'Yes, of course, but only if you really want to.'

'Yeah, I'd like to.'

My heart sank. I was delighted that I'd be seeing her again, but not at Lawrence and Jane's.

'It'll be a bit of a giggle.'

Those four words, 'Yeah, I'd like to' had depressed me, but those seven words, 'It'll be a bit of a giggle', scared the living daylight out of me. Ange was her own woman. How would she behave?

We took a taxi to Kierkegaard. I didn't want to take the Saab. It's quite elderly and very unexciting. Also Ange had never driven, so I was saving the impact of that rare advantage for a nice sunny day when I would take her to some of the exquisite stone villages and small towns of the Cotswolds. Anyway, I felt that I was too nervous to drive safely.

I hope that you will not be too harsh in condemning this nervousness. It was not that I thought Ange unworthy. I cared far more for her than for either Lawrence or Jane. I knew that their behaviour towards her would be far more reprehensible than anything she was likely to do. I just knew that it was a meeting that couldn't work – something that we would just have to get through and forget. We wouldn't need to stay very long, and Ange need never meet them again.

I also knew that from anybody else's point of view I would look ridiculous with Ange, and I felt sure that Lawrence's wavering professional confidence in me would slump still further. The only possible beneficiary of this dreadful evening would be young Mallard.

The taxi driver didn't help. A small area in the historic centre of Oxford is pedestrianised, and this has a disproportionate effect on the traffic, which has to make a wide circle through some of the city's less attractive neighbourhoods, past developments that should prevent their planners and architects from ever having a good night's sleep again. The traffic was heavy that evening, but even so it is not a long ride from my college to the suburb of Summertown. Nevertheless, there was time for the taxi driver to vent his fury on illegal immigrants, legal immigrants, New Labour, Old Tory, the

Iraq war, the Millennium Dome, the Home Office, minicabs, litter, students, the French, the England football manager and supermarkets. I was feeling sick in my stomach and hadn't the heart to argue. I made occasional unenthusiastic expressions of agreement, and tried not to listen.

'I can't understand it,' he said as I paid him. 'Everyone I have in the back of my cab agrees with everything I say. Why can't the government see it?'

We crunched across the gravel. Ange was wearing bright pink shoes that looked like designer clogs. She could barely manage the gravel on them. I was uncomfortably aware of how much flesh she was revealing. I begged her silently not to let her tattoo show.

The door opened before we knocked. Lawrence stood there, smiling enigmatically.

'The great moment has arrived,' he said. 'Do come in, Ange. Don't be frightened of us. We don't bite.'

Jane would if it was socially acceptable.

He led us into the sitting room and Jane rose regally from her chair.

'Angel!' she said. She could hardly have poured more feeling into it if she had said 'Your Majesty!'

'What's it to be, Ange?' asked Lawrence.

'Beer, please.'

'Beer. Ah. Good idea. Think I've got some, somewhere.'

'You get used to drinking beer, cos it's what everybody drinks at the darts, know what I mean?'

'Frankly, no,' said Jane.

'Ange is a keen supporter of international darts,' I said. My voice sounded shaky, to my dismay.

'Good heavens,' said Jane.

Ange examined my remark for traces of sarcasm. To my relief she didn't find any.

'Alan's coming with me to the World Championship, aren't you, Alan?'

This was news to me. My heart sang. We had a future.

'I . . . er . . . I certainly hope so,' I said. I was trembling with emotion. Lawrence was looking at me furiously. Jane had a smile set in stone, and there was no humour in it.

'My friend Tons Thomas will be playing,' Ange continued. 'He scraped in by winning the Extra Wet Strength Eliminator.'

‘Good heavens,’ said Jane.

‘The what?’ asked Lawrence.

‘There are worlds you know nothing about,’ I said. ‘Townsend Tissues are one of the main sponsors of darts in this country. When I first met Ange she was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of a burly man sneezing into a large and very effective tissue.’

Ange gave me quite a stern look, warning me that her sarcasm detector was working overtime and I had better be careful. I realised, with a mixture of dismay and admiration, that she was determined not to be over-awed by Lawrence and Jane.

Jane said ‘Good heavens’ yet again and Lawrence said, ‘Beer all right, is it, Ange?’ And Ange said, ‘Yeah. Ta. Just the job,’ and Lawrence got her another one and said, ‘Well, let’s hope all the excitement of the darts doesn’t put you off the preparations for your lecture, Alan.’

I cursed myself for not having thought of the possibility of making a bet with Ange over how long it would be before Lawrence mentioned the lecture. It would have been a bit of fun, and would have given us a nice feeling of collusion, and it would have made her realise that I didn’t like Lawrence, without my actually having to say so.

‘Hey, can I come to your thingummy whatsit lecture?’ asked Ange.

‘Ferdinand Brinsley,’ said Lawrence.

‘Yeah. Sorry. I mean, if you’re coming to the darts. Only I’ve never been to a philosophy lecture.’

‘You amaze me,’ said Jane, and I found myself despising her for being unable to resist the obvious. This surprised me. I had often hated her, but never despised her.

‘Yes, I . . . er . . . I don’t see why you shouldn’t come,’ I said.

‘Well, I’d like to cheer you on.’

‘There isn’t actually a lot of cheering at the Ferdinand Brinsley,’ said Lawrence.

‘No, but, I mean, Alan was telling me all about it, and I’d like to see him in action. Got a lot of bottle, has he?’

‘What? Oh. Yes. Lots of bottle,’ said Lawrence.

‘Are you another of these philosophers, then?’

‘Yes, I’m Head of Alan’s department.’

‘He also writes detective novels, under the name of Crispin Hereward.’ I tried to put a light coating of scorn into my voice,

enough to show Ange that I despised his novels, but not enough to alert Lawrence to it. 'You may have read them.'

'What colour are they?'

Lawrence looked puzzled.

'What?'

'The covers. Not the jackets, cos I get them from the library and they don't have the jackets on.'

'Yellow, mostly, I think,' said Lawrence, looking bemused by her question, as well he might. 'Some green. One may be black.'

'No. Sorry. Haven't read them. Cos I only read red books.'

Ange said this quite politely, almost regretfully. Lawrence and Jane looked completely mystified. I have to admit that I rather relished the fact that Ange hadn't read any of his books. Lawrence is rather bitter about the fact that 'The Inspector Didcot Mysteries', as he calls them, are almost the only set of detective novels written in English that haven't been adapted either by the BBC or ITV. He is eaten up every time he spots Colin Dexter, the creator of Morse, anywhere in the city. It ruins his day. The truth about Lawrence's books is that they just aren't good enough. He lacks the power of imaginative invention, which is illustrated by the fact that the only name he could dredge up for his wretched detective is the name of the first stop on the train to London.

'Do you like Oxford, Ange?' enquired Jane in her best hostess manner.

'Yeah, it's really lovely, it's fantastic, cos Alan took me on a ramble round it, didn't you, Alan?'

'Yes, I did,' I replied in somewhat less than sparkling fashion.

I made a mental note to talk to Ange, without being patronising of course, about her use of the word 'because' or 'cos', because her mistaken use of it got on my nerves. 'No, Ange,' I longed to say. 'I took you on a ramble because it's really lovely and fantastic, but it isn't really lovely and fantastic because I took you on a ramble round it, flattering though that interpretation of events might be.'

'Alan!' said Jane with sudden enthusiasm. 'We meant to tell you. The La Recolte at Chittingbourne St Mary has lost its place in the *Good Food Guide*.'

It was my turn to say 'Good heavens.'

'You shouldn't say "the La Recolte". La means "the",' said Lawrence. 'I mean you wouldn't say "I'm off to The The Ivy", would you, Ange?'

‘Well, anyway, it’s out of the *Good Food Guide*,’ continued Jane, ‘and I think it’s a scandal.’

‘Well be fair, darling,’ said Lawrence. ‘We did think it might be going off last time. We thought the pork belly was a little on the defensive.’

‘I’m sorry, Lawrence,’ continued Jane, ‘but there are places in the Cotswolds in that book that I wouldn’t take a hamster to eat in, and I still think it’s a disgrace.’

‘Excuse me, but where is it?’ asked Ange.

‘La Recolte?’ said Lawrence. ‘Just outside Chittingbourne St Mary on the Burford road.’

‘I rather think Ange meant the smallest room,’ I explained.

‘Oh. Sorry. Ha. First left at the top of the stairs, you can’t miss it,’ said Lawrence.

After Ange had left, there was a brief but telling moment of silence.

‘She’s sweet, Alan,’ said Jane.

‘I think so.’

‘Was it Ange with whom you were discussing the lecture when it all seemed feeble?’ enquired Lawrence.

‘Er . . . yes.’

‘May I employ the privilege of long-standing friendship and be very frank, Alan?’

‘No.’

‘We couldn’t be more delighted that you’ve found this girl, who no doubt is an excellent . . . er . . . although funnily enough I’ve always found upper-class girls to be more . . . er . . .’

He glanced at Jane, whose face was like granite.

‘But that was before I got married, long before I got married, and things may have changed, but, as I say, while this girl may be . . . er . . . thoroughly er . . . in . . . er . . . as it were, my point is, is it wise to allow this young lady to affect your work. Sex and philosophy don’t always mix.’

‘I had noticed,’ said Jane, and I could hardly blame her, this time, for the obvious retort. It was an opportunity too neat to miss. It upset me a little, though. The last thing I needed was to start feeling sorry for Lawrence.

‘Alan, at the risk of sounding very pompous . . .’ began Lawrence.

‘Yes.’

‘You are a little . . . no offence meant, I do assure you, but you

are a little . . . er . . . and I want you to take this in the way in which it's meant . . . you are a little . . .'

'Naïve.'

'Well, yes . . . absolutely. A little . . . in the nicest way . . . a little vulnerable . . . and this liaison is a bit . . . er . . . I mean, isn't it? Point taken?'

'I don't think I've ever seen a linguist reduced to such total inarticulacy. This "liaison", as you call it, Lawrence, began a couple of days ago, on a train. Ange and I are not about to declare the banns, but I do find her a delightful young lady of great sensitivity and charm.'

'Nice bog,' said Ange, from halfway down the stairs.

'Oh,' said Lawrence bravely. 'Thanks.'

'My uncle reckons that the khazi, cos that's what he always calls it, is the most important room in the house. He says it's the only room he can really express himself in.'

I was beginning to realise just how sharp Ange's social antennae were, and I was pretty sure that she was aware that she was behaving inappropriately in talking about bogs and khazies. Something had happened to send her on the offensive and I thought I knew what it was. She had realised that Jane had been freezing her out of the conversation with all that stuff about the *Good Food Guide*, and she just wasn't having it. I admired this, but it frightened me. It was time to bring the session to a close or my career might be going down the khazi.

'Yes, well, perhaps . . .' I began hesitantly.

'My uncle, he's a character,' continued Ange. She was back in her chair now, and as she stretched her legs out, I could see the top of her tattoo peeping out. 'He loves these parrot jokes.'

Ange, what are you doing to me?

'I mean he loves all sorts of jokes, but he seems a bit obsessed with parrot jokes, cos I've heard him tell lots of them.'

You are lovely, Ange, so much lovelier than Jane, but please . . . do . . . shut . . . up.

'There's this parrot on the *Titanic*, see, and there's this magician, and he's going to do his magic act, and this passenger goes up to him, and he says, "I've got my parrot with me, and he loves magic acts, can I bring him in to watch?" and the magician says, because he's a nice bloke, "Yeah. Why not?" So the act begins, and he does his first trick, and the parrot shouts "It's in his hat", and he's not

very pleased, but he goes on, and he does his second trick, and the parrot shouts out, "He's got another one up his arm", and he's really not very pleased at all now, but at that moment the ship hits an iceberg, and there's absolute chaos, and they're all in the water, and it's dark, and then in the morning it begins to get light, and there's the magician, clinging desperately to a plank of wood, and there's the parrot, clinging desperately to another plank of wood, and their eyes meet, and the magician glares, and the parrot says, "All right. I give up. What have you done with the ship?"

Ange laughed from the joy of living and the sheer glory of jokes, and I thought it pretty funny and I laughed too, but there was absolutely no reaction from Lawrence or Jane. Jane just looked icily determined not to be amused. Beside her, Queen Victoria would have looked like Dawn French. Lawrence's brow was furrowed. He was thinking.

'I wonder how they think up jokes,' he said. 'I wonder if they start at the end and work backwards.'

I jumped in again, to put a stop to all this, to end, as I thought, all contact between Ange, Lawrence and Jane for ever.

'Yes, well, perhaps we'd better go and find that curry, Ange.'

'I love hot curries,' she said. 'I always have the same thing. Meat vindaloo. I think I must have got a corrugated stomach or something.'

'Jane makes marvellous curries,' said Lawrence. 'Subtler than vindaloo, but very hot.'

'That sounds fantastic. I'd love to try one of those.'

Ange!

'Why don't you come one day next week?' said Lawrence. 'Wednesday?'

He gave Jane a mischievous look which stopped only just short of open hostility.

'That'd be ace,' said Ange.

I didn't get a chance to express an opinion. I was being manipulated by Lawrence and Ange for their own ends. I had become too much of a recluse. I had forgotten how to play the social game.

ELEVEN

THAT NIGHT ANGE refused to go to bed with her clothes on any more. She said that it made her much too hot in my narrow bed. I realised the sense of that. I knew that the relationship couldn't stand still. Also, I have to admit that I was really very keen to see her with nothing on. I was less keen, however, for her to see me with nothing on. No woman, apart from my mother, had ever seen me naked, and I don't think she had seen me naked since she changed my last nappy. I was very shy about revealing myself.

When I looked at her in her naked loveliness, I marvelled, and I began to feel aroused. Unlike Ruskin, whom I studied for my finals, I was not shocked at the sight of a woman's pubic hair. Unlike Ruskin (I must assume), I had seen my mother naked, though, I think, only twice. Ange's dark bush made a wonderful contrast to the smooth paleness of her skin. Her breasts, quite small but beautifully shaped and firm, seemed to me to be things of wonder. Her stomach was utterly flat. Her legs were slender but not thin. Her arms were almost thin, which made her look delightfully vulnerable. Had she not had her tattoo, I might have thought her perfect, and actually, for that reason alone, I began to warm to the tattoo, because perfection is daunting.

I don't know how I looked to her, whether she thought me a fine specimen of a man. I think I am not in any way particularly ugly. It's just that I have always thought that, while a woman's body is often beautiful, a man's is at least slightly absurd. I have no grave defects. My private parts have always seemed to me embarrassingly small, but Hemingway pointed out to Scott Fitzgerald, who was worried about the small size of his penis, that they always look smaller to their owner, who is looking down on them. Anyway, she made no comment about them. She nipped into bed, almost shyly, and I slipped in beside her, very shyly. I was tense when she touched me. I couldn't relax, and I hated myself for it, but I felt that it would not take much for her to stimulate me sufficiently.

Instead of that, however, she began to talk. The biter bit, you

might say.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘Let’s get this straight, Alan. I don’t mind if we don’t have sex. I’ve had a . . .’

She stopped. I knew that there was more that she wanted to tell me. I knew that she couldn’t. I knew that she would have to one day. Our relationship would demand it. My inquisitiveness would demand it.

That surprises you? It surprised me, too. I had always been considered to be one of the least inquisitive people about people in the history of human relationships. I was inquisitive about ideas, but not about people. A criticism that a colleague had made when I had shown him the first five chapters of ‘Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein’ was that I seemed to see Kant entirely as a mass of ideas and not as a person at all, whereas he believed that a person’s nature and a person’s ideas are inextricable. But I was building up a great head of curiosity about Ange and what she was trying to hide.

‘Let’s put it this way,’ she continued. ‘There’s a lot more to sex than sex. There’s kissing and hugging and fondling. There’s touching. Touching’s nice. I like it that my body’s touching yours. I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but from my point of view, I’ve had sex before and I will again and there’s no reason why you should be good at it, right? No, offence, I hope.’

‘None, you’re quite right.’

‘But what I haven’t had is chats about things like the principles of logic that you said your thingummy who’s your father lecture might be about.’

‘Ferdinand Brinsley.’

‘Not a lot of people talk like you around Gallows Corner. I really want to know things, Alan. Nobody wants to be an ignoramus. You said I could ask you anything I wanted. Well, what I want to know is, what is logic exactly? What are the principles of it?’

It would have been a difficult enough question to launch into in a supervision with a student, but lying naked beside a naked darts groupie, just after midnight, it seemed formidable.

‘I think the best way to start is with some specific points,’ I began. ‘It’ll be much easier to grasp going from the specific to the general. Let’s take a very simple example that I sometimes use to introduce the first principles. Are you still awake?’

‘Course I am. I’m interested.’

‘Right. Fifteen people are at a party. Seven of them have no left leg. Seven of them have no right leg. Are any of them legless?’

‘All of them, I should think. I would be at a party, if I only had one leg.’

‘I’d forgotten that use of the word. It’s not common currency among dons.’

‘You’re like one of them judges that say, “What exactly are these things called ‘The Beatles’?”’

‘Don’t. Don’t. Right. Let’s start again. There are fifteen people at a party. Seven have no left leg. Seven have no right leg. Do any of them have no legs?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Exactly! Well done. You’ve avoided the trap.’

‘The trap?’

‘The trap is to answer “one”. You don’t know because you haven’t been given enough information. All you’ve been told is that there are fifteen people there, and that altogether fourteen legs are missing. At one extreme there could be fourteen people with one leg missing, or at the other extreme there could be seven people with two legs missing. You haven’t been told, so you are quite right to say, “I don’t know.”’

‘I hate this party, Alan. It makes me want to cry. It’s so sad. All them people with missing legs. It’s horrid.’

‘No, it isn’t, Ange, because there is no party. It’s hypothetical.’

‘I know, but it’s still sad. Although if they’re handicapped like that I suppose it’s nice that someone is giving them a party. Yeah, I can see that.’

‘Ange, there is no party. There’s no emotion in logic. There’s no morality in logic. That’s one of the reasons that I choose this example. So now let’s change the figures. Let’s say that there are fifteen people, eight of them have no left leg . . .’

‘No!’

‘Ange. There is no party. Nobody actually has a missing leg.’

‘I know, but it’s making me sad thinking about it.’

‘Do you want to learn about logic or not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then listen. There are fifteen people, eight have no left leg, eight have no right leg, do any of them have no legs? Think of it as a puzzle. Think of it as fun.’

‘I can’t do this.’

‘You can. It isn’t as difficult as it seems. Honestly.’

Ange thought long and hard. The process clearly hurt, and didn’t seem like fun at all.

‘One of them has no legs,’ she said. ‘Poor bastard!’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because he’s got no legs, of course.’

‘No. Why did you say, “One of them has no legs”?’

‘Because there are sixteen missing legs and only fifteen people, this is killing me, I’m going to cry.’

‘Yes!’

‘What?’

‘Well done.’

‘I’m right?’

‘Well almost. No, that was good. You thought logically.’

‘Why did you say “almost”, then?’

‘Because you didn’t think it through enough. The full answer is “*at least one*”. You still didn’t have enough information. There could be four people with two legs, four with one leg and six with no legs.’

‘Have you got a tissue?’

I switched the light on, found a tissue – thin, weak, inferior to Townsends, and handed it to her without looking. She gave her nose a long blow.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I know it’s not real, I do, but I know it’s not real in the cinema too, and I cry there as well.’

‘All right. I’ll give you another example.’

‘Not so sad?’

‘Not sad at all.’

‘Something that won’t bring me out in goose-pimples?’

‘Guaranteed no goose-pimples. Try this statement. “Everyone in Leipzig has red hair.”’

‘You said it wouldn’t be sad.’

‘Well what’s sad about that?’

‘I don’t like red hair. A town with everyone with red hair would be horrid. It’d be bad enough being German with no sense of humour and all those sausages, but . . .’

‘Please, Ange. It’s just an example.’

‘You’re cross with me.’

‘Not really, but please just listen. It’s just an example. Now let’s consider the possibility and impossibility. Is the statement

“Everyone in Leipzig has red hair” a statement of the possible or the impossible? Note that I’m not asking you if it’s likely. It isn’t likely, in fact it’s extremely unlikely, but it is possible. I would therefore argue that you cannot say that it is unbelievable. What is possible must be able to be believed. Are you awake?’

‘Don’t keep asking me if I’m awake. It pisses me off. It does my head in. I’m bloody awake, all right? I’m listening. You asked me to, and I don’t know how to listen out loud.’

‘Sorry. So now let’s try to make an impossible, and therefore unbelievable, statement about Leipzig. “Everyone in Leipzig is in Didcot.” No, not Didcot, that reminds me of that bloody man and his detective. Swindon. “Everyone in Leipzig is in Swindon” Is that possible? No, because it’s utterly impossible for anyone to be in Leipzig and in Swindon at the same time, even with Easyjet. I hoped I might get a little titter there. Are you awake?’

She was asleep.

When we got up I wanted to tell her how beautiful she had looked with no clothes on, but instead I said, ‘Would toast and marmalade be all right?’

After four slices and three cups of tea, she said that she’d have to set off home. I didn’t want her to go. Life would be empty without her.

‘I’ve got to go,’ she said.

‘You don’t have to. You’re a temp.’

It was silly of me to say this, because that afternoon I had to make my belated visit to my mother. I honestly did think, later, though, that if Ange had stayed I’d have been prepared to miss my visit to my mother again and fu . . . and to hell with the consequences.

‘Exactly. I’m a temp, so if I don’t turn up I don’t earn any money.’

We walked to the station. I carried her bag. She was wearing the Townsend Tissues T-shirt. The weather was breezy, but sunny.

On the platform I said, ‘I could come down at the weekend.’

‘I’ve got a life, Alan. I’ve got friends. I’m going to a twenty-first, aren’t I? I’m going to a football match. I’m taking my sister. I’ve got a busy weekend.’

‘I didn’t know so much happened in Gallows Corner.’

‘Because it’s not Oxford, you mean? It’s not posh. People aren’t clever.’ She put on a phoney posh voice. ‘Oh my God. Are there

such places?’ Well, I hoped the voice was phoney. I hoped I didn’t sound like that.

‘Ange!’

‘Listen. *You* are coming to the World Championship darts. *I* am coming to the Frederick Rawnsley Memorial Lecture. *We* are going to Lawrence and Jane’s to eat curry. We don’t have to be in each other’s pockets every day, Alan. We aren’t husband and wife. We’ve never even had sex, for fuck’s sake.’

I looked round to see if anybody was listening. A man in a dark suit was reading the *Financial Times* with suspicious concentration. The eyes of two mature women were popping out of their heads. They turned away hurriedly as soon as they saw me looking.

‘Ange!’ I hissed. ‘People are listening. We’re giving them a free show.’

‘Sod them.’

‘You said it didn’t matter about the sex,’ I said in a hissed whisper.

‘It doesn’t, but we aren’t even a sodding item.’

‘It was you wanted to talk last night.’

‘Don’t argue, Alan. I don’t do arguments.’ She had lowered her voice, for which I was grateful, although I suspected that she was doing it so as not to gratify the eavesdroppers, not to please me. ‘I like you. I’ve really enjoyed meeting you. We’re meeting next Wednesday. Don’t rush me. Don’t crowd me. We’ll see how we go. We’ll see how far we can go. I’m warning you, Alan, because I know me. You come on heavy, it’s over. Finito. I don’t do heavy. Not any more. Never again. All right?’

I agreed, albeit glumly.

‘Bleedin’ ’ell, Alan. I know more about life than you do. I’m beginning to wonder what you do know. No, I know the answer. Germanic Thought from Cunt to Frankenstein, that’s what you know and that’s all you know.’

‘Kant to Wittgenstein.’

‘Whatever. Here’s the train. Piss off. I hate goodbyes.’

TWELVE

IT WOULD BE a difficult visit to my mother. She would still be fuming because I had missed my usual day without letting her know, but I was aware, as I bought the cake and fetched the Saab from its garage, that there was an extra element now. I longed to tell her about Ange. Why? For all sorts of reasons. Believe it or not, I felt more proud of the relationship than ashamed of it. At least I was living, and I knew that my mother felt that I was too dull to have any kind of life worth relating. Also, conversation at the Home was painfully difficult. This would at least be something to talk about. Besides, I would be delighted to be able to shock her. You may think that cruel at her age, but you haven't sat there week after week for nine years and watched her being so smug in her condemnations, so complacent in her disapproval. The main reason, however, was more honourable: I just did not want there to be such a yawning gap between us. If I had such a large and growing secret, it would make our relationship even more sterile, my visits even more pointless. I realised that in the nine days since I had last visited her, Ange had begun to become really important to me.

The Home smelt of fish and stale cabbage. It always smelt of stale cabbage, regardless of what they had had for lunch. The only difference that their lunch made to the atmosphere was that, if they had fish, the whole place smelt of fish *and* stale cabbage.

My theory of relativity is much simpler than Einstein's. Time goes at varying speeds. Time is a malign omniscient God who can see what I am doing and moves accordingly. 'He's with his mother. Slow down.'

'Hello, Mother.'

Peck on the cheek. No warmth. Same every time.

'So, you've come eventually.'

I didn't rise to this. I put the carrier bag down. In it was the cake. Walnut.

'I've brought you a cake, Mother. Walnut.'

'I hope there aren't bits in it. My teeth can't cope with bits.'

‘How are you?’

‘Why do you ask? You aren’t interested. If you were, you’d have come on Wednesday.’

‘Mother, I wasn’t well, I didn’t want to give you food poisoning, you aren’t as strong as you used to be, it might kill you.’

‘Why should you think that would upset me? What sort of a life do I lead?’

I chose to ignore that. I repeated my question. ‘How are you?’

‘Oh, mustn’t grumble.’

‘Good.’

‘My balance isn’t what it was.’

What could I say to that? All I could dredge up was, ‘Oh dear. I’m sorry.’

She lowered her voice. ‘I need a nurse in the room when I go to the commode.’

I was shocked. This meant that her balance really was bad. She would never be seen on the lavatory by another human being unless it was absolutely necessary.

‘I’ve fallen twice.’

It was coming, the beginning of her terminal decline.

I decided to change the subject, this one upset me, but I let a minute or so go first. I didn’t want to use up my questions too quickly. They had to last for two hours.

‘What did you have for lunch?’ I asked at last.

‘Fish. We always have fish on a Friday, though of course you wouldn’t know that, as you usually come on a Wednesday.’

‘Mother, are you going to spend the whole of this Friday complaining because I didn’t come on Wednesday, because if you are I might as well not have come at all.’

‘Well, don’t if you don’t want to. I don’t want to be a burden.’

I wanted to scream, but I controlled myself. I used up a few seconds, and then I asked my next inspired question.

‘What sort of fish?’

‘I don’t know.’

My heart sank again. Was her memory beginning to go?

‘You couldn’t tell. It was so tasteless.’

A wave of relief swept over me so powerfully that I broke out into a light sweat. Her remark had been a criticism and not a lapse.

I so wanted to be with Ange. My mother’s room was stifling. Ange was the fresh air outside. Ange was the world beyond the windows.

Now that I had fallen . . .

I was going to say 'in love'. No. No, I couldn't be in love with Ange. That would be stupid. I enjoyed her company. I would be sad if I couldn't see her again. That was all.

'Come back, Alan.'

'What?'

'You were miles away.'

'Sorry, Mother.'

'You only come for two hours. It's not very nice if you spend part of it miles away. I'm eighty-seven. I get no conversation all month. Margaret's well meaning but she has no conversation. Unfortunately that doesn't stop her talking all the time. I look forward to our chats.'

Dear God!

'Where were you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'When you were miles away. Where were you?'

'Nowhere, mother.'

'Has something happened?'

'No, Mother, nothing's happened.'

'Is something wrong?'

'No, Mother, nothing's wrong.'

Oh, the gaping chasm between us. I decided that next Wednesday I would tell her about Ange.

Next Wednesday was the day when I was taking Ange to eat Jane's hot curry, but I made sure that before I met her at the station I gave my mother her full two hours. I couldn't have faced any more of her rebukes.

I drove towards the Home very slowly. I always drove slowly, but when I went to visit my mother I drove even more slowly, as if I hoped that there was a chance that the place might burn down before I reached it. On this occasion, however, I drove even more slowly than usual. I was screwing myself up to tell my mother about Ange. I fantasised about how the conversation might go.

'Mother! I've something to tell you. I have a girlfriend.'

'Oh, Alan, darling! At last! How terribly thrilling! Do tell me all about her.'

'Well, her name's Ange.'

'Oh how lovely and informal.'

‘Ange Bedwell.’

‘My word, that sounds promising. Where’s she from?’

‘Gallows Corner.’

‘Oh how nice. I don’t know the area myself, but it sounds most dramatic and historic. How old is she?’

‘She’s twenty-four, mother.’

‘Oh! Well, good old you. And what does she do?’

‘She works as a temp in a skip-hire firm in Romford.’

‘Alan! How refreshingly exotic. You must bring her to visit me.’

I could wish, as my students say, when I ask them if they are making good progress with their essays.

As I parked in the Home’s spacious car park, I was shocked at the realisation that I had passed through three roundabouts without noticing them.

The visit began in its usual way. Peck on cheek. ‘I’ve brought you a cake, mother. Chocolate cream.’

‘M’mm.’

This was her ungracious way of saying ‘Thank you’. The subtext was, ‘Why haven’t you brought me one I don’t like? You know how I enjoy grumbling.’ Her other favourite was lemon drizzle. When I played safe and took chocolate cream and lemon drizzle alternately, she had complained that I wasn’t giving her enough variety.

‘How are you?’

‘Oh, mustn’t grumble’

‘Good.’

Silence. Use up as much time as I dared before the next nugget of inspired enquiry.

‘What did you have for lunch?’

‘Meat.’

‘What sort of meat?’

‘I don’t know. It had no taste at all. There wasn’t apple sauce so it probably wasn’t pork. There wasn’t mint sauce so I suppose it can’t have been lamb. Beef, I suppose.’

‘Was there mustard?’

Things were going well. We might be able to use up two or three minutes on lunch.

‘They never give anything spicy. I think they think it might make people need a sit.’

The pudding used up a minute or two, and then my mother said, ‘Alan, I don’t like the view from this room. It’s the same every day.

It's getting on my nerves.'

Well, I'm sorry, but I don't think they'll rotate the countryside to suit you, Mother. But I didn't say this. I didn't say anything. I was summoning up my courage to tell her about Ange. This took quite a long time, and in the end she was forced to speak.

'So, what's my boy been up to?'

The perfect cue.

'Oh, nothing much.'

I couldn't tell her today. It would take too much energy and moral courage. There wouldn't be any left for our visit to Lawrence and Jane. I'd tell her next week.

I felt the most enormous relief at this decision. It wasn't weakness. It was only sensible.

'Alan,' said my mother in an appalled tone. 'I think I need to have a sit. Fetch the nurse, will you?'

'You don't need the nurse, Mother. I'm here.'

She looked at me in horror.

'I mean a proper sit,' she said. 'I can't have you seeing me do that.'

I thought of saying that I wouldn't exactly watch, but sense prevailed.

'I'm your son, Mother.'

'Exactly. I don't know the nurse, so it doesn't matter.'

I fetched the nurse . . . and waited in the corridor. I felt ashamed of getting a little frisson of excitement out of wasting eleven whole minutes in this way.

When the nurse came out, I had a word with her.

'How is she, nurse? I'm her son.'

'She's got all her marbles.'

'Oh, I know. Don't tell me.'

A wry look between us.

'But how is she . . . in herself?'

'Getting older. Aren't we all? Nothing . . . nothing specific. She's fallen a couple of times. She's lost her confidence.'

'Is she . . . difficult?'

'Not really. She's one of the best.'

That shocked me. Was it just me that brought the worst out in her?

I went back in. There was a smell of cheap air freshener, beneath which I could detect a faint aroma of . . . exhausted internal organs.

‘You’ve been talking to the nurse,’ said my mother. ‘Asking how I am behind my back.’

Too right she still had her marbles.

‘Well, I did have a word. I care, mother. You’re my mother. You’re eighty seven.’

‘There’s no need to remind me. I like to forget that. I don’t like being the subject of a medical confab, Alan.’

‘Sorry, Mother.’

Conversation limped along until the girl with the short tongue came in with the tea, a cup for my mother and one for me, and two plates for the chocolate cream, and two forks with which to eat the chocolate cream.

Now the cake ritual began. I put the cake on the table and cut two slices. I placed the slices on the plates. Then I went to a drawer and fetched two delicate little cake forks. My mother wouldn’t eat with the forks provided by the home. They weren’t cake forks. She had standards. Besides, she didn’t know where they’d been.

I had a piece of cake too. One time when I had eaten a big lunch and couldn’t face cake, she had been suspicious. ‘Why aren’t you having any?’ she had asked. ‘What’s wrong with it?’, and I’d had to eat a piece so that she would eat a piece. She never offered a piece to the girl or to anybody else. I felt humiliated by her meanness.

We had a second slice of cake. Then I plunged the two forks provided by the home into my piece of cake, so that the girl, who had learning difficulties as well as a short tongue, wouldn’t feel hurt. My mother glared. ‘You’ll get tetanus,’ she said. It was always tetanus these days. It had been mastoids or polio when I was young. When I was eight I had poked my ear and my mother had said ‘You’ll get mastoids,’ and I had said, ‘But it itches, Mummy,’ and she had said, ‘Well, don’t poke it then, and you’re a big boy now. It’s time to stop calling me “Mummy”. It’s time to start calling me “Mother”.’ I had never told anyone what a devastating shock that was to me.

I washed and dried my mother’s two cake forks and put them back in the drawer. She made no comment, but she tutttuted silently with her eyes. Once she had asked me why I did it, and I had said that I didn’t want to hurt the girl’s feelings by showing that we hadn’t thought her forks clean enough.

‘Sympathy for all the world except your mother,’ she had said.

At last the two hours were over, and I could decently leave. As I

stood up and said, 'Time to be off. I'm tiring you,' I had a thought that astounded me.

It was eleven years since I had even mentioned 'Germanic Thought From Kant to Wittgenstein' to her. This was partly out of pique because she had once said, 'And how's your little book coming on?', but mainly because of the sheer impossibility of any meaningful dialogue on the subject. Now I knew that being unable to talk about Ange hurt me even more than having to ignore 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein'. The implication of that was barely credible to me. I was astounded and even rather frightened to realise that Ange was more important to me than my masterpiece, my life's work, my *raison d'être*, but it's a fact, I knew at that moment that she was.

I also realised that I had been fooling myself, that I couldn't tell my mother about Ange, not next week, not the week after, not ever. It might kill her.

Now there was a thought. *There was a thought.*

You're shocked? So was I.

THIRTEEN

‘HERE’S ANOTHER.’

Yes, Ange was regaling Lawrence and Jane with pre-curry parrot jokes. I was less worried this time. My thoughts were that if the evening went well, that would be a bonus, and if it went badly, agonising though it would be, it would mean that there would be no more such evenings, and Ange and I would be able to develop our relationship in peace. I had a great sense of serenity that evening, and that, as I am sure you will realise by now, was rare for me. I had felt it from the moment I had seen her walking out of Oxford Station, a beaming smile on her lovely face. I had felt it necessary to hide just how deeply pleased I was to see her, and I’d had a feeling that she was also hiding how excited she was to be with me again, but maybe I was fooling myself.

I’d also had to hide that I was relieved, hide that the days and nights since I had last seen her had been an agony, hide that it had taken every scrap of willpower I possessed to refrain from phoning her to see how she was, to find out what she’d been doing, to check that she was coming.

So now I was off my guard, happy, exhilarated, ready to take my beloved’s side in any arguments that might develop.

‘There’s this bloke, right? . . . has this very naughty parrot, and he’s going out, so he says to the parrot, “Any tricks from you today and you’ve had it, right?” And he goes out, and he comes home, and there’s thirty hundredweight of coal dumped in the lounge.’

‘Sorry, what?’ asked Lawrence. ‘I didn’t catch it. What was dumped?’

‘Coal.’

‘Oh . . . coal.’

‘Coal, in the lounge, on the pale carpet. So he rings the coalman up, and he says, “What’s all this then? Why is there coal all over my carpet?”, and the coalman says, “You ordered it this morning, told me to put it there”, and he rings off. The bloke’s puzzled, and then he sees the parrot looking mischievous, and he says, “You did it, didn’t you? You ordered it.” So he grabs the parrot, and nails it to

the wall. "Right, you little green sod," he says, "you can stay there for a week." On the other wall there's this crucifix, Jesus on the cross, and the parrot, he says to Jesus, "How long have you been there?" "Two thousand years," says Jesus. "Two thousand years? Blimey," says the parrot. "How much coal did *you* order?"

Ange giggled charmingly at her own story. I made sure that I laughed uproariously. The faces of Lawrence and Jane didn't crack.

'Did you read Bentwood's piece about jokes and their value as a displacement activity?' said Jane. 'Very interesting.'

'Yes, I did,' said Lawrence. 'I must confess that I thought he was using a sprat to catch a mackerel.'

'Bentwood's sprats have more truth in them than other men's mackerels,' she responded, with a coy intellectual satisfaction which made me think that she must fancy Bentwood.

'Jane's purpose in introducing Bentwood into the conversation, Ange, is to exclude you politely but utterly. It's La Recolte at Chittingbourne St Mary all over again,' I said.

'Alan!' said Lawrence.

'Bentwood, I should explain,' I continued, 'is a large and loquacious Welshman, brilliant but unreliable. A sort of Tons Thomas of philosophy.'

'Tons Thomas?' said Lawrence.

'We mentioned him last time,' I said. 'Surely you haven't forgotten the Mercurial Man Mountain from Merthyr?'

'Are you making fun out of me?' said Ange.

I was astounded. I had thought I was making fun of Lawrence and Jane.

'No! No!'

'You think it's so funny, don't you? International darts. Tons Thomas. Such a huge joke. Well, Tons is a good bloke, he's a nice guy and I like him.'

'I know you do. You've slept with him.'

Even before I'd finished saying it I realised that this was a very grave tactical error. The trouble was that I wasn't being tactical; my jealousy came from another source, swift and unbidden, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

'Yeah,' said Ange furiously, 'and I'm going to sleep with him again, right, because he's young and he's normal and he wants me for a bit more than my mind.'

I still wasn't very worried. I was embarrassed by the row, yes, and

I was embarrassed by her remarks about my wanting her only for her mind, yes, even at that moment I was concerned about my sexual image in front of my Head of Department and his wife.

‘Angel!’ I said. ‘I wasn’t making fun of *you*. I wasn’t.’

She stood up, glared at me, turned and strode from the room.

‘Angel!’

I went to pursue her, but Lawrence hurried into my path and stopped me.

‘No, Alan,’ he said.

‘Let me go,’ I shouted.

I tried to push past him. He pushed me in return. I was stunned. I was furious.

‘Let me go,’ I yelled again, and then I shouted, absurdly, ‘It’s a free country.’

He continued to push me. I raised my right arm to try to hit him. He grabbed my arm and pushed it backwards. I tried to knee him in the groin but missed, and while I was off balance he gave me a great shove and I fell backwards into a chair. I kicked out and caught his leg with my foot. He gave an outraged ‘ow’ and I tried to scramble to my feet while he was hopping around in pain, but he recovered in time to shove me back into the chair. I didn’t stand a chance. He was younger than me, and fitter, he had a personal trainer and cycled at weekends, and he had Jane hopping around at his side, waiting to put the high-heeled boot in if necessary. I couldn’t believe what had happened, and I was panting so much that I was incapable of speech. I really wasn’t fit. If I survived the night, I must start to take some exercise.

Two minutes earlier there had been a civilised scene in this sitting room. Two academics and their ladies had been having a drink before sitting down to a famous curry. Now my lady had stormed out, I was fighting to get my breath, and my Head of Department had rolled up his trousers to examine his leg. How fragile is the order and calm with which we try to live our lives.

As soon as he had established that his leg was still there, Lawrence came and stood over me, watching me trying to recover my breath.

‘I’m really sorry about that,’ he said. ‘Really sorry.’

‘So am I,’ I said icily.

‘I know. Out of order. Absolutely no blame attached to you for your reaction, Alan. In fact I may say that I found your fighting

spirit impressive in one your age. Not sure young Mallard would have had it in him.'

That was so Lawrence, so . . . is the word 'snide'? To claim to be supporting me and to slip in a reference to young Mallard, who was being warmed up to be my nemesis.

'I had to do that, Alan. Trust me. I did it for your own good.'

I stood up, breathed deeply, began to be capable of speech. I gave Lawrence a dignified glare and blessed the fact that I am two and a half inches taller than him.

'There are two remarks that I have never been able to stand,' I said. 'One is "Trust me" and the other is "I did it for your own good". It takes some kind of genius to use them both in the same sentence.'

'Now look, Alan,' he said. 'Whether you are going to see her again or not, it's best not to go after her now. Believe me. I know about women.' He became conscious of Jane's look boring into him, and he added, 'From the old days.'

I didn't deign to reply. It was too late to go after her now, anyway. She would have disappeared into the Oxford night.

'Listen, Alan,' said Jane, who had watched the fracas with icy serenity. 'Don't think we like having to tell you this, but we feel we must. She isn't for you. Has it occurred to you, and this is going to make you angry with me, I know, but has it occurred to you that she might be a gold digger?'

'She's digging in the wrong gulch if she is. I'm an academic, not a footballer.'

'Believe us, Alan, she'd probably sleep with anybody.'

'No. Only darts players. This is the age of specialisation.'

'All right,' she said, 'but the fact is that she's practically a whore.'

'That's very insulting,' I said.

'Well you were pretty insulting to me.'

'Yes, but only because you're a bitch.'

If I had been a footballer, and not an academic, I would have felt that I had scored a goal. The development of the conversation had led to a position in which I had an open goal, couldn't miss, and as I put the ball into the net I felt a real sense of exhilaration. I had wanted to say that to Jane ever since I had known her.

She stood up, slowly, carefully, with control.

'I shall overlook that,' she said, opening her mouth less than she usually did when she spoke. 'I shall forget it. I will not let fifteen

years of friendship be destroyed because of one moment of madness.'

She strode from the room with dignity. I had to admit that to myself. I certainly wasn't going to admit it to Lawrence.

Lawrence poured me some more of the Macon-Lugny, a generous measure, and, even though I knew that he was doing it so that he could pour himself a generous measure without looking greedy, I was grateful. I did actually believe that he had been trying to save me, and, even though I didn't want to be saved and didn't believe that I needed to be saved, I knew that there was at least a bit of integrity and affection behind it. And it was hard, ultimately, not to sympathise with him in his marriage to Jane, in his knowledge that his department didn't respect him, in his awareness that the Inspector Didcot Mysteries hadn't made the TV screen because they were what Ange – oh, Ange! – would have cheerfully called 'crap', and boring crap at that.

'Bit strong, Alan,' he said.

'Yes. Sorry. I'd better be off.'

'Stay. There's heaps of curry. Make your peace with Jane.'

I tried to refuse. I thought maybe I would go to the station and see if I could find Ange before she went home. But I knew that Lawrence was right, it would be a tremendous risk, if the argument flared up again it might become fatal. And I didn't fancy a lonely evening in my rooms. And Lawrence was my Head of Department and it might be diplomatic. Oh, and Jane's curries were wonderful.

'All right,' I said. 'Thank you. I'll stay.'

'Good. You really care about that girl, don't you?'

'Yes, Lawrence, I really do.'

'I can sympathise. I don't think I . . . I don't believe that I . . . this sounds stuffy . . . "approve", because I can't see a happy ending in it, but . . . if you want to . . . er . . . whatever you do, I regard it as irrelevant to your work in the department.'

'Thank you.'

'Provided you don't bring it into disgrace, of course.'

'Of course.'

'It was no use going after her, Alan, pleading, showing your weakness. There would have been no benefit in that route. You would just have humiliated yourself needlessly. I know, I . . . I once . . . but that's another story.'

He leant forward, and I came out in goose-pimples. I knew that

he was about to make a revelation which he would regret in cooler moments.

‘I fucked a cabin stewardess on the *Oriana* when Jane was laid up with seasickness in Biscay. She was lovely, Alan. Lovely. Ange reminds me of her.’

‘Thank you.’

I wasn’t quite sure why I said ‘Thank you.’ Perhaps because I could think of nothing else to say, and my usual ‘sorry’ would have been inappropriate – but the revelation did explain why Lawrence had been so ready to suggest that we came for Jane’s curry. He liked having Ange around. Probably he fantasised about her. I hated that thought. Cabin stewardesses and upper-class women. I wondered how often he had been unfaithful.

‘So I do understand,’ he continued.

‘Thank you.’

‘An affair is one thing, Alan. A fling is one thing. I’m all in favour, though I’d never admit that to Jane – it might even be good for you – but a commitment, Alan, a commitment. I don’t think that would be a very good idea. Not, as I say, that it would have any bearing on our professional relationship. Incidentally, Alan, I told you that about the *Oriana* in strict confidence.’

‘Of course.’

‘I trust you never to repeat it.’

‘Of course.’

‘I trust you also never to use it against me, if . . . well, if you should ever have any temptation to use anything against me.’

‘Why should I ever have that?’

‘Who knows? Who ever knows what will happen? When I accepted the office of Head of the Department, I was aware that sometimes I might have to make difficult decisions.’

‘Are you trying to tell me something?’

‘Alan! We’re philosophers. We’re masters of the hypothetical. I don’t say you will ever have any reason, but I’ll tell you why I trust you. You’re a gentleman. There aren’t many of us left.’

I wondered if he would have thought me a gentleman if he had known that, earlier that very day, the thought of killing my mother had first occurred to me. Not that I had taken it seriously. It had just been a passing thought. I was quite surprised to find it popping up again.

FOURTEEN

I HARDLY SLEPT a wink during the long night that followed. It wasn't the curry that kept me awake, it was Ange. I couldn't stop thinking about her, trying to picture her in her bedroom in Gallows Corner, trying to see inside her beautiful head. Was she tossing and turning, thinking about me? I didn't think so. Or was she still fuming over my perceived mocking of her? I didn't think that either. I felt that she would be sleeping soundly, evenly, deeply. I resented her for it. I knew that was stupid. I was resenting her for something that I had imagined, something for which I had no evidence. That wasn't the behaviour of a rational man. But was I any longer a rational man?

I didn't want an affair. I didn't want a fling. I wanted . . . well, I didn't put a word to it. I was aware that my friends would think me reckless in the extreme to commit myself emotionally to this woman. I didn't care. After a lifetime of being miserly with my emotions, I was ready to be utterly and totally reckless. I didn't decide to be so. I was so. There wasn't any choice in the matter.

Whenever I have a really bad night, I give up on the whole idea of sleep. As dawn breaks, I give thanks that the long night is ending at last, and in my relief I fall into a really deep sleep. So it was that night. By the time I woke up it was too late to phone Ange, she would already be at work, and I knew better than to ring her there.

In the cold light of a grey English morning I might have expected to feel altogether cooler and calmer, but I didn't. I was perfectly well aware that anyone who knew about the relationship would feel that I was making a complete fool of myself – but what sort of an impact had I made during the long years when I hadn't been making a fool of myself? At least as a fool I would stand out. At least I would be a talking point at last. Have you heard about old Calcutt? He's got a woman. No! She's twenty-four. No! He bought a pair of jeans yesterday. He never!

Yes, I did. During the long day that followed that long night I went out and bought my very first pair of jeans, tried them on, kept them on, walked out of the shop in them, for fear that if I didn't I

would never have the courage to wear them. I felt terribly conspicuous and self-conscious as I walked through the centre of Oxford in them, with my old trousers in a bag under my arm. Nobody looked at me twice, of course.

I couldn't quite bring myself to buy a T-shirt.

Don't laugh, but I bought the jeans in order to feel more confident when I phoned her. I didn't mind looking fifty-five in front of Ange. I didn't want to look fifty-five if I happened to have to talk to her mother.

I waited until six fifteen, thinking that by then she would probably be at home after work, but her mother answered. I could imagine her only as an older version of Ange. I tried to picture the scene in that house in Gallows Corner, but it was entirely beyond me. I had no idea what anything in Gallows Corner looked like.

'Hello. It's . . . er . . . my name's Alan. I . . . er . . .'

Her mother was probably younger than me. I hated this.

'I . . . er . . . is Ange in at all?'

Even as I said it, I thought what a stupid way I'd put it, she either was in or she wasn't in, she couldn't be partly in.

'No, she's not back yet. Are you the same Alan who rang before?'

It really was beginning to sound as if there were dismayingly large numbers of Alan's in Ange's young life.

'Yes, I . . . er . . . I am, yes.'

I couldn't imagine that, when she came home, her mother would tell her that a sparkling conversationalist and wit had been asking for her.

'Do you know when she'll be back?'

'No, I don't. You know Ange.'

No, I don't!

I wanted to ask what sort of mood Ange had been in the previous evening when she got home unexpectedly from Oxford. I couldn't, of course.

'Thank you,' I said, 'I'll try later.'

I couldn't stay in my rooms a moment longer. The walls were closing in on me. I went for a brisk walk, hoping that it would raise my spirits. I strode down the High and turned left into Longwall Street.

I came to a modern building, part of New College, which looked like a multi-storey car park that didn't have enough storeys. It might have looked good in miniature in an architect's office. In

reality it looked dreadful – ugly, brutal, unadorned. If this was the best that a modern generation of architects could think up for my great city, our civilisation was doomed.

It had a long flat roof and I thought of Ange saying ‘They put something on top of everything in the olden days, didn’t they?’ and my heart almost broke. Oh, why wasn’t she there to say ‘They ain’t put sodding nothink on top of that, have they?’, and to share my pessimism and bitterness about our world.

I turned left into Holywell Street, full of charming domestic architecture, but not looking sufficiently cared for. Several of the buildings needed painting. A few had appalling modern doors. I felt suddenly fearful for my Oxford and her future. Was this a displacement activity for my fears about Ange and our future?

I stopped for a half of beer in a pub. I couldn’t remember when I had last been in a pub on my own. It had bare boards and wooden tables and it was full and very lively. Most of the drinkers were young. When I had been young I hadn’t really enjoyed it, I had wanted to become older because I had felt that I had no talent for being young. Now, for the first time in my life, I wished that I was young. Was that what I was doing with Ange – trying to live at last the youth that I had missed? No. This relationship wasn’t about me. It was about her – lovely, unselfconscious Ange. Yes, I was besotted, and I didn’t care.

It took me twenty-five minutes to force the beer down.

I hurried back to my rooms, fearing that I had left it too long.

I phoned. I was so nervous that I could hardly speak.

I got her mother again. My heart sank.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘It’s me again. Alan. Is . . . er . . . is Ange in at all?’

Oh no. Why did I say that *again*?

‘No, she’s just gone out.’

‘Oh. Did she say how long she’d be?’

‘No.’

‘Do you have any idea how long she’ll be?’

‘No. You know Ange.’

Don’t keep saying that.

‘Well, could you . . . er . . . tell her that Alan called?’

‘I’ll *tell* her.’

The implication of her tone was that she would tell her, but a fat lot of good it would do. You know Ange.

‘Did you . . . er . . . did you by any chance tell her that I called

before?’

‘I did. I said there was a call from a man called Alan.’

‘Thank you. Did she say anything?’

‘Yes. She said, “Oh. Him”’

‘Just that? “Oh. Him.”?’

‘Just that.’

‘Oh.’

The only glimmer of hope was that she *had* known which Alan it was. Perhaps there weren’t queues of randy young Alans after all.

‘And then she said, “Mum, I’m just going to change and then I’ll pop out.”’

‘I see. Well, thank you, Mrs Bedwell.’

‘Bedwell???’

‘Isn’t that your name?’

‘Did she tell you her name was Bedwell?’

‘Er . . . well, yes.’

She screamed with laughter.

‘Oh, she is naughty. She is a one. Her name is Clench, Alan. I am Sue Clench and she is Angela, which she hates so she calls herself Ange. Bedwell! Well, I never. Clench isn’t good enough for her, I suppose.’

‘Well, thank you, Mrs Clench.’

‘No problem.’

She was still laughing as she put the phone down. And I? I rushed to the lavatory and was sick.

I would never see Ange again. She was a fantasy even to herself, let alone to me. Bedwell! How she must have laughed. There was no reality to her or to our relationship. It was over. I had well and truly made a fool of myself.

No. I would not accept that it was over. What harm was there in calling herself Bedwell? There might not be any ulterior motive. It might be sheer high spirits, and it was hardly a hanging offence.

It was over, though, or it would be unless she rang. I would never be brave enough to ring her mother again.

I toyed with the idea of going to Gallows Corner the next day. I even phoned up for train times from Liverpool Street, but then I realised that I didn’t have her address. I knew that she worked for a skip-hire firm in Romford, but I didn’t know whether she went home by train or bus. No, I might have to go to Gallows Corner in the end, but it would be the move of a desperate man, and she

would know that, so it would be far from ideal. I would have to be cool, as my students said. Alan Calcutt cool? Don't laugh.

Next day I steeled myself and found that I did have the courage to ring her mother again. I had to. I don't say that I wouldn't have been able to live without Ange. I might have to, if *she* gave *me* up, but it wasn't possible for me to give her up.

How I got through that day I can't imagine. I had to give supervisions to a couple of students. I had a lecture to deliver. Between times I ought to have worked on the Ferdinand Brinsley. I had returned to the subject of chance. It was too late to try anything else. I had at least thought of a title that might work – the Improbability of Probability – but that day I couldn't write a word, couldn't summon up a thought.

My lecture was on Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher with whom Lawrence identified so deeply that he had named his house after him. I was always worried that one day he would choose to sit in on my Kierkegaard lecture to see what sort of a fist I was making of the work of his hero. Thank God he didn't choose that particular day, although, to be fair to myself, I think I delivered the lecture pretty well. It was at least the twentieth time I had done so, after all.

I don't think either of my two students would have noticed anything amiss during their supervisions either. I might not have fulfilled my early promise, but at least I was an old pro. I did wonder, once or twice, while I was discussing the inadequacies of their latest essays, how old I seemed to them, how out of touch, how pathetic. I was aware that I was making a determined effort to be a little bit younger. It occurred to me that I had never even thought of the possibility of forming a relationship with one of my students. They had seemed so much younger than me, even when I had started out. Now it would be . . . unseemly.

Was not my relationship with Ange therefore unseemly? No. I knew that teachers quite often did form relationships with their students, but to me that would be a breach of trust, an abdication of professionalism. Ange, however, was not a student, and above all not my student, so I need have no such qualms.

Yes, I used logic as my servant, and came always to the conclusion that I desired.

I was trying to discover, all the time, in the subtext of those two hours, just how realistic or unrealistic it was to hold out any hope

that Ange would continue to have a relationship with me. Everything that happened had an impact on my life with her. If a clock struck, I compared its timbre to the sound of her voice. If I heard a bus on the road outside the college, I wondered if she went to work by bus, and, if she did, whether she sat in the front seat upstairs, like a child.

By half past four my university work was finished. I thought about doing an hour on 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein', but I couldn't face it. Instead I went out and bought a *London A-Z*. I looked up Gallows Corner, and it didn't look like a place, just a corner, between two places I had never heard of, Gidea Park and Harold Wood. There was a flyover, where Eastern Avenue became Southend Arterial Road. Two streets with amazingly unimaginative names led into Gallows Corner. One was called Main Road and the other Straight Road. I wondered if she lived in one of these or in one of the little roads that ran off them. I longed to know. I needed to know.

At half past five I had a shower. I didn't want to feel sweaty when I talked to her mother. I put on my new jeans and the most casual and youthful of my shirts – the one that a 48-year old man would not have been ashamed of wearing.

I thought that if I rang before six o'clock, it would be too early, she would not yet be home.

'He's waiting for six o'clock,' said the malign God of Time. 'Spin it out, chaps.'

At last it came.

I didn't ring immediately, because I didn't want either Ange or her mother to think that I had been waiting for the cheaper rate. Also, I wanted to give the impression that my call was casual, cool, laid back, and other very un-Alanish things.

I remembered that Ange had regarded room 393 as lucky, because three was her lucky number. I rang, therefore, at three minutes and thirty-three seconds after six. Think me foolish if you like, but it worked. She answered the phone herself.

My voice, of course, gave the lie to the idea that I was cool and laid back.

Oh, the relief at the sound of *her* voice. Waves of relief washed over me.

'Oh, hello, Alan.'

Flat. Neutral. Not openly hostile, that was something.

‘I wasn’t mocking you at Lawrence and Jane’s, Ange,’ I said after a few desultory exchanges. ‘I wasn’t.’

‘I can’t talk about it now. My mum’s coming in. Meet me outside Oxford Street tube station at half past eight.’

‘What?’

She had rung off.

I looked at my watch. It was nine minutes past six – multiples of three.

I could do it.

I had to do it.

There would be no chance with Ange if I didn’t do it.

I cleaned my teeth, not very thoroughly, time was of the essence, grabbed a jacket, any jacket, found my wallet and keys, and left the house just as I was. I walked to my garage at a steady pace, forcing myself not to rush. I didn’t want to arrive sweaty. I had suddenly become very conscious of sweat.

I had made an instant decision that I would go by car. If the train times didn’t fit I might have had difficulties, but there was more to it than that. I would have felt horribly helpless, claustrophobic even, on the train. At least in my car my progress was in my hands.

I’ve told you that I am not a fast driver. I’ve mentioned the fact that I have six good friends I met at the university. Most of them live in the villages around Oxford. I often drive out to visit them, and I never hear anyone sing out, ‘Michael Schumacher’s arrived.’

On this evening, though, I drove faster and more confidently than I had ever done, discovering in the process a location that I had never visited before – the fast lane of the M40. My little Saab groaned once or twice in surprise. This hadn’t been an agreed part of my relationship with it. I had bought it off a university couple. It had been her car and so they had called it the Mem Saab. I had thought this silly, but now, after meeting Ange, I found that it amused me.

If I was surprised to discover that I suddenly found silly jokes amusing, I was even more surprised by my unexpected confidence behind the wheel. I had to attribute it to the life force emanating from Ange. Perhaps you are beginning to wonder if I really am starting to go loopy, but what other explanation could there be?

I made it without too much difficulty, even found a parking space, and was at the tube station by 8.25. Now my exhilaration left me and I felt stressed and exhausted.

Also, there were several exits to Oxford Street underground station and I didn't know which one she would come to.

Well, I had to pass the time somehow, and wandering from one exit to another was as good a way as any.

It was 8.38 before I saw her and by that time I had persuaded myself that she wasn't coming. She waved cheerfully, and we fell into each other's arms instinctively before we both realised that our relationship wasn't on that footing. Then we both shrank back in slight embarrassment, and smiled rather shyly. It was beautiful. It was a synchronised greeting.

We went into the nearest pub. It's not easy for me to describe the pub for you, as I had eyes only for Ange, but I do remember that, being near the Palladium, it had signed photos of the stars. I recall thinking that I hoped she wouldn't mention them, because, although they were probably all very famous, I didn't know who any of them were. It must have been fairly full, because she said, 'Quick. Alan. Grab that table', and before I could stop her she was off to the bar and buying pints for us both. I remember too that there were some dirty glasses on the table, and that the ashtray was full, and when she got back she said, 'Scruffy buggers, they wouldn't stand for that down the Black Bull' and cleared the mess away, banging the dirty glasses on the bar counter pointedly.

At last she was sitting there beside me, her skin pale and sweet below her dark hair, her little mouth just waiting to be kissed. Then suddenly she looked so astonished that a shiver of fear ran through me.

'You're wearing jeans.'

'Well, yes, I . . . I thought the old image was just a little . . . well . . . a trifle stuffy, perhaps.'

'Well good old Alan. There's hope yet.'

Hope for me or for us?

'I really wasn't making fun of you at Lawrence's, you know,' I said. 'I was making fun of *them*.'

'They're your friends.' She still wasn't quite sure.

'It's a friendship based solely on mutual interests. I wouldn't care if I never saw either of them again. Ange, there is something I . . . I mean, it's probably not important, but I . . . when I rang your mother she said your name was Clench.'

'Yeah, well, I suppose it is in real life.'

'Is this not real life?'

‘Well, yeah, course it is, but you know what I mean. It’s not real like being a temp and living in Gallows Corner. It’s fun. It’s a bit of a giggle.’

Oh, Ange, those innocent words plunged a dagger into my heart. I had felt that your lips, slightly parted, had been inviting a kiss. The warmth of your smile had turned my heart upside down. I had just about persuaded myself that you were falling in love with me. But no, it was just a bit of a giggle.

The pain didn’t last. After all, she was there, and she was smiling, and we were friends, and . . . well . . . after all, a bit of a giggle with Ange would be . . . well, at least it would be a bit of a giggle.

‘So you call yourself Bedwell.’

‘Yes. Naughty.’

‘It is rather.’

‘Well, would you want to be known as Clench? You wouldn’t, would you?’

‘No, I must admit that.’

‘Besides, it was Dad’s name.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Nothing. Nothing, Alan. Cheers.’

We raised our glasses and drank.

‘I felt awful talking to your mother.’

‘She’s harmless.’

‘I felt . . . that she’d think me a dirty old man. I felt uneasy. Because you haven’t told her about me.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Well, I can’t blame you. I haven’t told *my* mother about *you*.’

‘We’ll be our secret.’

‘Yes, our secret –’ I stopped. I had been going to add ‘love’.

‘Alan,’ she said, suddenly serious, her antennae picking up what I hadn’t said. ‘Don’t expect too much.’

I told her how I had found myself using the ridiculous phrase, ‘Is Ange in at all?’

‘I mean, you couldn’t be partly in, could you? Unless you’d been sawn in half in a magic act that had gone wrong, and one half had been sent to the mortuary for pathology tests, and the other half had been sent home to your mum for sentimental reasons.’

‘Alan! I didn’t realise you had that sort of imagination.’

Nor did I. I was getting a few surprises about myself. That’s not a bad thing to happen at the age of fifty-five.

She linked her arm in mine. Our eyes met, and hers were unusually solemn.

‘I have to keep up to the mark with you, Ange. Can’t be stuffy old Alan, can I, now?’

I was about to ask her to come back to Oxford with me, when she spoke, as if she could read my mind.

‘I wanna make some plans,’ she said. ‘That may surprise you. You think I’m happy go lucky, right, only thinking of the moment, right?’

‘Well, yes, I do, rather.’

‘But this is darts.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’ve got two tickets for the whole of the final week of the World Darts Championship.’

‘Good Lord.’

‘They’re like . . .’ she swallowed her next word hastily, and my antennae realised that she had stopped herself from using the f word. ‘. . . bleeding gold dust.’

‘You . . .’ I was going to say ‘You amaze me’, but then I thought of Jane saying that and how horrid it was and I stopped myself just in time.

‘The moment it finishes, I go online and order them for the next year.’

‘Two tickets?’

‘Yeah. In case.’

‘In case of what?’

‘Anythink. In this case, you.’

‘Me?’

‘I want you to come with me. Jesus Christ, you’re dim sometimes for someone who’s supposed to be so clever.’

That observation, echoing the one I had overheard in Pangbourne in the dull old days of Rachel, made me look at my relationship with Ange with sudden, excited incredulity.

‘You want me to come with you to the whole of the final week of the World Darts Championships?’

‘Yeah. Course I do. It’s at the Happy Valley Country Club, near Danglely Bottom.’

‘Danglely Bottom?’

‘I know. Isn’t it a bloody awful name? It sounds like the arsehole of the world. You’d think it was right out in the sticks, but it’s only

just outside the M25. It's like, I dunno, a small town or big village, I dunno which you'd call it . . . It's nothing much, because posh people don't want an address with Dangle Bottom in it, so the house prices are low. There's this pub, nothing special, but Viv's a hoot. I always book a double room there.'

'Just in case.'

'You've got it. I don't want to be rude, Alan, but you're catching on much quicker than you did when we first met.'

'Thank you.'

'No, I mean it.'

'Let me get this straight. You want me to spend a week with you at the World Darts Championship and come back with you every evening and sleep with you in this pub, where Viv is a hoot?'

'Yeah.'

'What can I say except, "Bleedin' 'ell"?'

She laughed.

'Nice one, Alan.' Then she looked serious. 'Alan, please say "Yes".'

That was a great moment. I think it was the first time she had really truly asked me for something, really truly shown that she wanted me to be with her.

'It's difficult,' I said. 'I have a job, you know. I have supervisions with students. I give lectures. I have to prepare the Ferdinand Brinsley. I'm not a free man.'

'Oh, Alan.'

I couldn't bear to see her looking so disappointed. Well, all right, that was a very small part of it. I dreaded the thought of a week of darts, I dreaded the thought of Viv being a hoot, but I dreaded far more – far, far more – the thought of Ange being there without me.

'Of course I'll come,' I said.

She squealed with delight and kissed me on the lips, and I had a strange and rather sad thought. It was the first time in my life that I'd had real evidence that I'd made somebody happy.

'About the pub,' she said, lowering her voice with a tact that she had never shown me before – maybe we were each having a good effect on the other – 'I don't mind if we don't . . . if you can't . . . you know. I'll just enjoy being with you.'

My heart almost burst.

'I've had a thought,' she said. 'There are one or two of the games where I don't care about the result, like they're players that I couldn't care less whether they win or not. We could piss off back to

the pub and I could bring a book . . .'

'With a red cover.'

'Goes without saying. And I could read my book in one corner of the room and you could work on your lecture in the other corner. That would be really cosy.'

I found it immensely reassuring that this young lady thought that being cosy was a nice thing. I was beginning to realise how she was miscast as an Essex girl. I was beginning to hope that . . . that we might have what I had hardly dared to think about – a future.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, it would.'

Then she turned serious.

'Next week's the first week of the darts, our week together is the week after,' she said. 'I won't see you before then, Alan.'

I felt devastated.

'Why?'

'Because . . . I don't want to be rude, Alan, but I don't want to.'

'I see.'

'You don't see at all. I want fun, Alan. I told you. I don't do heavy. There's no reason except that. I'm not seeing another man or anything. I'll work, get some cash, do a few sessions down the Black Bull, go clubbing, have a few drinks, get nicely pissed once or twice, see me sister, cos I have to do that, and spend a bit of time with me mum, cos I have to do that too under the circumstances.'

'What circumstances?'

'Well . . . we aren't a happy family, leave it at that. Alan.'

It was a command, not a suggestion.

I left it at that.

'Besides, I want to work up to our little adventure.'

'Work up to it?'

'Like look forward to it. Like get a bit starved of you so that it's great when I see you, right?'

I didn't know how I would cope with being a bit starved of her, but that was just about the nicest thing that anybody had ever said to me. I don't think anybody had ever felt remotely starved of me before.

'Another pint before I go? Your shout.'

'I'll get you one, but . . . I'm driving.'

'Driving? You drove down?'

'Only way to make sure of getting here on time. Drove faster than my little Saab has ever been driven. Couldn't be late for my bird.'

I daresay the word 'bird' is long out of date, but I felt very bold using it.

Ange looked impressed.

'Bleedin' 'ell,' she said.

I went to the bar, where it took me ages to get served with Ange's pint of lager. I'd had so little practice at it. I didn't buy myself anything. To me, drinking a whole pint was like downing the contents of a water butt. I didn't want to be caught short in my Saab. I usually carry a sample bottle with me, for emergencies, in view of my little weakness, but I'd taken it home to be washed and in the rush I'd forgotten to put it back.

When I returned to her we sat in easy, companionable silence for a few moments, watching the noisy, restless multinational bustle of the pub. It was lovely. It was our very first easy silence together, and I knew that the evening had been a considerable success.

'Why's your lecture called the Ferdinand Brinsley Memorial Lecture?' she asked at last.

'So that we won't forget Ferdinand Brinsley, who he was, what he did.'

'Who was he? What did he do?'

'I've forgotten.'

We laughed. We laughed and laughed and laughed. When we thought that we were about to stop, we laughed again. It was truly a shared laugh. I don't think I had ever been as happy in my life as I was during that laugh.

FIFTEEN

I WAS LIVING in suspended animation, waiting for our week together to begin. I found myself getting dressed, making coffee, even giving supervisions and lectures, but I felt detached from it all. I was doing it all from memory, as if I was a computer just following a programme that it had been set. I found it impossible to do any work on the Ferdinand Brinsley. Had I been Descartes, I might have said of myself 'I don't think, therefore I'm not.'

Then I discovered that the World Darts Championship was on the television, not just in little bits but almost the whole thing, on and on and on. And on and on and on. And on and on and on and on. I hadn't even begun to realise how big an event it was. I thought I ought to watch a bit of it, so that I wouldn't seem like a total idiot next week with Ange. So, between supervisions and lectures, there I was, in my rooms in the cloistered calm of the college, with the sound on fairly low so that nobody would know, watching this extraordinary happening.

It seemed to me to be the most boring activity that I had ever witnessed. I didn't know how I could stand a week of it, even with Ange.

The commentators went from banality to absurdity to an enthusiasm which seemed to me at first to be totally false, to be a desperate attempt to breathe life into this deadly dull sport. 'The nation is awash with darts fever.' 'There's a global explosion in the world of darts.' 'He comes from a town called Alpen, so he obviously likes his breakfast.' 'Northern Europe is on fire this week.' 'That was the biggest come-back since Muffin the Mule.' 'The passion is tangible.' 'The crowd are braying for a result.' 'This is World Championship darts. This is the greatest pressure you can feel.'

But as the week wore on – not that I was watching all the time, of course – a far worse interpretation dawned on me.

They meant every word of it.

I imagined Kant and Spinoza sitting watching the darts, hearing

the Master of Ceremonies yell out at the top of his voice, 'Let's play darts', at which the crowd . . . well, they did what you learn that crowds always do when you watch sport on television – they erupted.

The maximum score you can get on a darts board is one hundred and eighty. Every time this happened – and it happened amazingly often – the score was yelled out – 'One Hundred and Eighteeee' – and large numbers of boards with 180 on them were held up amid wild cheering. The room in which the matches were played was huge, and filled with tables of casually dressed, mainly young people drinking pints of lager. There was lager as far as the eye could see. I would be there next week, feeling a real fish out of water, but with Ange.

'Pint of lager, Spinoza?' 'Thank you, Immanuel – you don't mind my calling you Immanuel, do you? – I thought *Critique of Pure Reasoning* was wonderful.' 'S'ssh, Spinoza, he's got a three-dart finish.'

How could anyone with even half a brain go to darts and enjoy it? Playing it was bad enough, but watching it . . . I'd rather sit with my mother.

I couldn't believe it. They showed action replays. A dart flew through the air on to the board, and they showed a replay of it in slow motion. The linguist in me felt offended at the term action replay in connection with the replaying of an incident that had contained nothing that I would describe as action in the first place.

I learnt that a match consisted of five sets, and a set consisted of five legs, and each leg began at 501 and the score moved down until you got a final double. That seemed like an awful lot of match to me. I was going to be bored stiff. Then, to my horror, I discovered, from something one of the commentators said, that the matches got even longer with each round – seven sets, nine sets, eleven sets.

Then suddenly there he was, on my screen, invading the privacy of my rooms. Tons Thomas. He was burly and sweaty and had a beer belly. How on earth could she fancy him? I noticed that they didn't call him Tons, they called him Geraint. I was shocked to find how much I wanted him to lose. I discovered that he was expected to lose, he was an outsider, a long shot, a qualifier. But he won that first match. I had to admit, though, that he had a captivating, good-natured Celtic smile, and not many gaps between his teeth, and that

he was gracious and modest in victory.

And then there was Nineteens Normanton, as large as life. No, larger. He was burly and sweaty but he did not have a beer belly. He was all muscle. He looked as if he'd been quarried rather than born. How on earth could she fancy *him*? I noticed that they didn't call him Nineteens, they called him Craig. He was expected to struggle in his first match against a very promising player from Holland – 'They're breeding darts players instead of tulips now' – but he won too. I wasn't pleased. I felt jealous of him. I had to admit, though, that he was an impressive figure, in the way that Ben Nevis is impressive, and that, although barely articulate, he too was modest in victory.

I had realised by now that it was inevitable that I would also see Shanghai Sorensen, and that I would want him to lose, and that he would win, and so it proved. He was tall and relatively slim and he definitely didn't have a beer belly. I had no difficulty, unfortunately, in believing that she had fancied him. I noticed that they didn't call him Shanghai. They called him Bent, which is a rather unfortunate name that Danes sometimes call their children. 'You were wrong, Shakespeare,' thundered the commentator, as Bent Sorensen scored a maximum. 'There's nothing rotten in the state of Denmark after all.'

I wondered if I would be able to contain my jealousy and remain pleasant to Ange.

I had to. There was no other way.

'This event is the jewel in the crown.' 'Everyone wants to feel part of the party.' 'If you could bottle this atmosphere and sell it, you'd be a millionaire.' 'We're not down the Dog and Duck now, I can promise you.' 'Let's play darts.' 'Game on.'

I was going to have to dredge up some enthusiasm from somewhere. My life depended on it – literally.

No. That was what one of the commentators had said 'He has to finish with these three darts. His life depends on it – literally.'

My life did depend on it metaphorically, though. My life with Ange might even depend on it literally. Without Ange I would have no life. So, yes, on reflection, my life did depend on it – literally.

Horried though I was, I found it difficult to switch the darts off. It was quite a relief, therefore, to have to, in order to go and buy a cake, and visit my mother.

The Saab seemed very sluggish that Wednesday afternoon, as if it shared my reluctance to arrive at the Home.

I took refuge in fantasy once again as the tension in my stomach increased. Again I was utterly unconscious of passing through several roundabouts as I imagined my conversation with my mother.

‘I’ve brought a cake for you, Mother.’

‘Thank you. You’re a good boy’

‘I’m not a boy, mother, I’m fifty-five, a man, a lover.’

‘What???’

‘Well, not literally. I haven’t even fucked her yet.’

‘Alan!!!!’

‘I’ve only known her for just over a fortnight, mother. She calls herself Ange Bedwell.’

‘Oh, Alan, stop it.’

‘But it isn’t her real name. Her real name is Angela Clench – she’s one of the Gallows Corner Clenches.’

‘No. Stop it.’

‘No, mother, this is a girl who has slept with lots of the top darts players, so it’s quite a feather in my cap. She’s been fucked by Tons Thomas and Nineteens Normanton, so I feel pretty privileged.’

‘I don’t feel well.’

‘She works as a temp in the office of a skip-hire firm in Romford. She’s an Essex girl.’

‘I can’t breathe.’

‘I won’t be able to see you next week, I’m afraid. I’m neglecting my work on some excuse or other – this could cost me what’s left of my career, but who cares? – and I’m spending the week with her at the World Darts Championship, and sleeping with her in a pub where a woman called Viv is apparently a hoot.’

‘Aaaaargh!!’

‘Help! Help! I think my mother’s had a heart attack.’

The Home’s car park is unnecessarily large, a constant rebuke to uncaring relatives and friends for not going to visit the elderly people within as often as the planners had calculated. As I parked I felt shocked by my realisation of the sharp moral decline that had developed in my fantasies in only five days.

It was so tempting. It wouldn’t be wicked. It would be a mercy killing. She got no pleasure out of life now. I don’t know that she ever had got much pleasure, but now she got none. Only a couple of

weeks ago, when I had told her that I hadn't wanted to give her food poisoning because it might kill her, she had said, 'Why should you think that would upset me? What sort of a life do I lead?'

I put the carrier bag on the table.

'It's lemon drizzle this week, Mother.'

It was undeniable that it would be convenient for me. I loathed these weekly visits. I was going to loathe them even more as my life with Ange developed.

'M'mm.'

I was utterly tired of not being properly thanked by this graceless old woman. She didn't deserve to live.

What was I thinking about? It had just been a private joke, a wicked little thought.

I had to tell her that I couldn't come next week, because of the darts. I couldn't tell her that, of course. I almost couldn't tell her at all. It never crossed her selfish mind that I might have a life, that I might have things to do. I felt even more claustrophobic than usual in her room that afternoon, more claustrophobic even than in the tiny, windowless room in which I am writing this.

I screwed up my nerve. This was so difficult.

'I . . . I'm afraid I won't be able to come and see you next week, Mother.'

Would it work? Would it kill her if I told her about Ange? No. She was tougher than that.

'But you always come and see me.'

It was true. I hadn't had a holiday longer than six days for nine years because of our Wednesdays. Nine years of bloody Wednesdays. Even if it didn't kill her, surely it would shorten her life? No. It would lengthen it. She would thrive on the disapproval. In any case, if I told her and she didn't die, I would have to visit her when she knew about Ange, and I couldn't face that.

'Yes, well, next week I can't. I'm sorry.'

I was disappointed with myself for saying that I was sorry. I ought to be above such petty lies, especially when I had to tell such big lies.

'I . . . er . . . the fact is, Mother, I . . . I'm going to a big conference in Prague.'

I wished I hadn't used the Prague excuse. It was foolish of me. I was actually going to a big conference in Prague in a month's time, and I would have to think of a new excuse then. I was going to have

to tell more and more lies in the weeks and months to come. Oh God.

‘Oh, well, that’ll be fun for you. They say Prague’s very beautiful. Think of me, won’t you, stuck here?’

No, if I wanted to kill my mother, I would have to murder her.

That was ridiculous. It shocked me that I could even think such a thing. I banished the dreadful thought from my mind, and took refuge in my first safe subject.

‘So, what did you have for lunch?’

‘Some kind of meat. I don’t know what. I’m losing my sense of taste, Alan.’

All my mother’s few pleasures were being taken from her, one by one. It would be a mercy killing.

No!!

I broke out into a light sweat all over my body. How could I get through another ninety-four minutes? There were no safe subjects any more.

SIXTEEN

I PICKED HER up at Dangle Bottom Station, as arranged. She had two big, heavy suitcases.

‘Can’t wear the same things twice, know what I mean?’ she said. She put the cases down and gave me a kiss full of promise. I found it hard to believe that I was being kissed like that. ‘You got time off, then,’

‘Well, I phoned Lawrence and said I was staying with friends and had gone down with the flu.’

‘I’m impressed. I’m really impressed. Well done, Alan.’

‘I didn’t find it easy to sound flu-ridden. I hope I was convincing. I felt very nervous.’

My lie was just one of the things that was making me feel nervous. I was nervous about being a fish out of water at the darts, about our nights in the pub, about whether I would have the energy to laugh when Viv was a hoot, about how much I would stand out in the crowd with my old-fashioned shirts and sweaters, about how jealous I would feel about Tons Thomas, Nineteens Normanton and Shanghai Sorensen. I crashed the gears before we’d even left the car park. Ange gave me a look, but didn’t comment. I wanted to say, ‘Well, at least I can drive.’ It surprised me that she didn’t drive, but I was pleased about it. It gave me a rare advantage, an advantage I’d lose if I crashed the gears too many times.

There were no more disasters as we straggled through Dangle Bottom, past the roadworks, past the sad park, past the boarded-up village shop. My spirits sank at the sight of the Royal Oak and its pot-holed car park. It looked as if it had seen better days.

‘This is Alan, Viv.’

‘Ah! So it really is a double this time. Hello, Alan. I’ll show you to your room.’

Viv had flaming red hair, and a sad, sagging face. Like her pub and her car park she looked as if she had seen better days. I tried to look younger than fifty-five. I knew that it wasn’t working.

She led us up a narrow, creaking staircase. The room was

friendly, flowery, a bit ragged at the edges. There were an alarming number of cracks in the low sloping ceiling. The doors of the wardrobe had swollen from the damp and didn't close properly. The bed looked as if it might sag. I wondered how much action it could take, and how much action it would see.

We unpacked. I let Ange take all the wire coat hangers and piled my clothes neatly on the only armchair. She removed two large pieces of stiff cardboard from one of the bags. She had written the number 180 on them in huge, slightly babyish figures. Dear God, I was going to have to leap up and wave one of those about, and it was going to be on the television. Supposing Lawrence saw. Oh God! I hadn't thought of that. No, he would never watch darts. I was quite safe.

'This is it,' she said, as we went back to the car. 'This is the best moment of all, just before it starts, when it's all still to come.'

'Viv didn't seem much of a hoot, to be honest,' I said, as I drove away from the pub.

'I know. She's . . . er . . . this bloke she's been with has only gone and ditched her, hasn't he, the bastard?. It's hit her bad. I thought she looked terrible. To be honest, Alan, I'm not sure how much of a hoot she'll be this year.'

I couldn't tell her how deeply relieved I was, and I felt ashamed of it as well. Viv was unhappy, her emotional life shattered, and I was relieved. It was the casual nature of the selfishness that shocked me.

I seemed to be shocking myself rather a lot lately.

'What did she mean when she said, "It really is a double this time"?''

Suddenly Ange looked very young, almost pathetic.

'I couldn't find anyone to come with the last two years,' she admitted. She put her hand on my knee. 'I'm fussy, you know.'

'Good,' I said. 'I did wonder if I'd get in the way of your one-night stands.'

She took her hand off my knee.

'Stop the car,' she said. 'I'll walk from here.'

'What? Don't be silly.'

'I don't have one-night stands. Stop the car.'

'No. That's stupid. I was only . . . well, sort of joking. I didn't mean anything.'

'Bollocks. You're a philosopher. You always mean something. You

couldn't not mean something even when you fart. I wanna get out, Alan.'

I slowed down, in case she opened the door, but I didn't stop.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But . . .' I felt that I had to defend my remark. 'What about your darts players?'

'They're different.'

She stared grimly out of the window, but she didn't ask me again to stop the car.

I could sense that she was growing very nervous as we reached the Happy Valley Country Club, while I dithered like an old man as to where to park. There were so many spaces that I couldn't decide which to use.

'Do you think I'm too close to the right-hand edge of my space?' I said, after I had parked. 'I don't like to park selfishly.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake, Alan,' she snapped.

It was not a good start, and I could see that she regretted her remark instantly. She was very nervous, and hyper-active. What on earth was wrong?

I was upset, and I decided not to let her off too lightly.

'Come on,' I said abruptly, grabbing her hand, and I marched off pulling her as if she was a reluctant dog.

'Not that way,' she said urgently. 'That's the Players' Entrance.'

'Well, we'll go that way then,' I said. 'We might catch sight of one of them.'

'No!'

It was an appeal.

'Oh look,' I said. 'There's Nineteens Normanton.'

He was walking with a couple of friends. His huge frame was unmistakable. He looked even bigger than he did on the television.

'I don't want to see him,' she hissed.

'Too late,' I said. 'He's seen you.'

I saw Nineteens point Ange out to his two friends. He said something and they laughed. Their laughs were not pleasant. They had contempt in them. He had said something insulting. I found myself seething that she could have slept with a man like that, who despised her for it.

But I wouldn't show my anger. I wouldn't reveal my jealousy.

'Morning, Nineteens,' I said. 'Good luck today.'

He looked at me in astonishment, then at Ange.

'Nineteens,' he said. 'That's a good one. Hey, I'm Nineteens, lads.'

His friends laughed again.

‘Well, have fun with your funny friend,’ he smirked. ‘See you later.’

They moved off. Ange was scarlet,

‘I told you not to go that way,’ she said, ‘and why did you have to go and call him Nineteens? You’ve spoilt the whole week. I don’t want to go in now.’

‘Yes, you do,’ I said. ‘Don’t be so fucking childish.’

I couldn’t believe that I had said that. I don’t think she could either. It worked, though. She came in without further protest.

Ange showed our tickets, and the moment she entered the vast bar, her spirits rose, she began to be excited again. She led the way straight to our table, which was a table for four. It was in a good position.

‘This is a good position,’ I said. ‘We’re very near the oche.’

‘Oche’ is a strange word. It’s pronounced like hockey and some people think it’s derived from that game. Others relate it to an Anglo-Saxon word *oche*, meaning to lop, or to the French word *ocher*, meaning to nick or cut a groove. Since it’s a groove behind which the players must throw, this seems more convincing to me. Anyway, I could see that Ange was impressed that I knew the word. I explained that I had been watching the event on television during the last week.

‘Good for you,’ she said. ‘Good old Alan.’

This fact seemed to restore her good mood entirely. A smartly dressed waitress took our order for two pints of lager. I didn’t dare order anything else. I didn’t want to embarrass Ange, and I had the fact that I was driving as an excuse for drinking slowly.

The huge room was steadily filling up, the television cameras were in place, and I wished that I could feel even a faint flicker of interest.

Just before the first match began, two people joined us at the table.

‘Hiya,’ said the young man, who had a stud in his left nostril. ‘I’m Brad.’

‘Hiya,’ said the girl, who had a stud in her right nostril, ‘I’m Em.’

‘Hiya, Brad. Hiya, Em. I’m Ange,’ said Ange, who, thankfully, didn’t have a stud in either nostril.

‘Hello, Brad. Hello, Em,’ I said. ‘I’m Alan.’

‘Hiya, Al,’ said Brad.

‘Hiya, Al,’ said Em.

Ange squeezed my hand, maybe in apology for her snappiness, or perhaps out of excitement or affection, or even out of gratitude that I hadn’t said, ‘I don’t answer to the name of Al. My name is Alan.’

The Master of Ceremonies – I wasn’t sure if that was what he was called, but it’ll do – gave out his great cry of ‘Let’s play darts’, and the crowd . . . yes, they erupted, erupted all around me. Ange erupted. Brad erupted. Em erupted. I did my best to erupt, but I was aware that it was a feeble effort. I needn’t have worried, though. My shortcomings weren’t noticed in the eruption all around me. I realised that I had been like a man caught in a violent earthquake who was worrying that somebody might see that he hadn’t tied his shoelaces up. I really was going to have to learn to become less self-conscious.

I don’t recall anything of that first match. I had never heard of either of the players. I couldn’t have cared less about the result. I tried to concentrate, for Ange’s sake, but the tedium drove me back like fumes from a fire. I had plenty to think about, however. Our meeting with Craig Normanton – I mustn’t think of him as Nineteens – had distressed and puzzled me. He had not behaved towards Ange as I would have expected. Something was not quite right.

Occasionally a great cry of ‘One Hundred and Eighteeee!’ would rend the air, and I would have to leap up and yell and show my board with the figure 180 on it. I found it difficult to inject the expected vigour into my performance, but I had already realised that, in the vigour all around me, I would not be noticed.

Ange acted as my educator and my commentator.

‘He’s had dartitis,’ she whispered of one of the players.

‘What?’

‘It’s like a nervous thing where you twitch or somethink, and you can’t let the dart go or it comes out all wrong or somethink. It can take you either way, dartitis. It can beat you or you can beat it, right? You come back stronger than ever when you’ve beaten it.’

‘Fascinating,’ I lied.

How long would it all go on?

‘Col was shaky there. He’s not in the zone,’ said Ange. I had no idea what she meant, so said nothing. ‘Now for the final leg. This is where millimetres separate men from mugs.’

I tried to enthuse. I really did. The room erupted. Somebody was

a man, somebody else was a mug, I had no idea which, and I couldn't have cared less.

We had a burger. I didn't let on that it was the very first burger I had ever eaten in my life. I tried not to think of BSE. Millions ate burgers. It couldn't be that dangerous.

'That was great, wasn't it, Alan?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'Are you enjoying it?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'I'm so glad you came, Alan.'

The next match featured Nineteens . . . sorry, Craig . . . and he was playing a Swede.

'Darts have exploded in Scandinavia,' commented Ange.

'The hills are alive with the sound of darts.'

I was not proud of this piece of repartee, but it seemed to please Ange and she said 'Nice one, Alan.' I think she was awarding me points for trying. Then she lowered her voice, so that Brad and Em wouldn't hear. 'Alan? Don't cry out, "Come on, Nineteens" or anything, will yer? He's not called Nineteens. That's just how I think of him.'

'I know. And I don't think I'll be crying out.'

If I did it would be for the Swede. That would put the cat among the pigeons.

Craig won. Next on was Tons. As he waved expansively to the crowd – he was much more extrovert than Craig – I saw that he had noticed Ange, who was standing up to cheer him. He gave her a tiny smile, and raised his eyebrows. I realised that Ange embarrassed him rather, and I couldn't think why. I realised how much I was noticing where Ange was concerned, how I'd woken up and become observant, intuitive even. Love *was* extraordinary. Love? Was I in love? Surely not. Slip of the tongue. Well, not the tongue. I hadn't spoken. Slip of the brain.

I noticed something else that was also extraordinary. I was getting an erection. I couldn't believe it. I'd had hints of them before in Ange's company, but this was a full-blown monster. It would have been most welcome on several occasions, but I didn't want it here. I wanted to go to the loo, and I wouldn't be able to until it had subsided.

I leant over to Ange, 'Don't worry,' I said in a low voice. 'If I meet him, I won't call him Tons.'

Her eyes opened wide in astonishment. They looked a paler blue than ever.

Tons . . . sorry, Geraint . . . won, setting up, yes, a quarter-final clash with Craig.

‘What an appetiser that is,’ said Ange, and she added, ‘The Swede’s hopes are shattered as he returns sadly to Stockholm.’ She was becoming quite alliterative in her commentator mode.

It wasn’t just the need to go to the loo. I wanted to go out, I needed to go out, to get some air, to get away from the clamour. I felt very odd, trapped in that great sea of lager. I felt as if I was suffering from claustrophobia and agoraphobia at the same time, but I felt too that I couldn’t go while I still had my erection. It would be seen by several hundred people in the room and by millions on television. It would go before me on my little voyage like the prow of a ship.

If only I could have gone proudly, as if showing my badge of manhood, but I wasn’t like that. I did everything to try to get rid of it. I thought about Kant, and Wittgenstein, and Spinoza, about Iraq, and Tony Blair, and Cherie Blair, and still it persisted. At last, in desperation, I even thought about young Mallard. The erection subsided. Oh, blessed relief. I felt my first ever flicker of affection towards the man.

During that day, my ‘longest day’, I managed two pints of lager and went to the loo five times. Ange had seven pints and went once. On my second visit, I noticed that there was a machine selling England World Cup condoms. ‘Stand Proud for England’, said a slogan on the machine. ‘Get the red, white and blue tonight’.

On my third visit I tried to buy a packet of three, but hadn’t any change, and the machine didn’t take notes or credit cards.

I went to the souvenir shop to get change. To my fury I was blushing. I might as well have printed a headline and stuck it on my forehead. ‘55-year-old don buys first ever condom.’

On my fourth visit, there were too many people around, and I bottled out, as Ange would have put it.

On my fifth visit I became the proud possessor of three condoms, red, white and blue.

‘What are you smiling about?’ asked Ange on my return.

‘I’m enjoying the darts,’ I lied.

We had another burger. I didn’t tell Ange that it was only the second burger I had ever had in my life. I tried not to think about

my cholesterol.

‘Let’s play darts.’

On and on it went.

We got back to the hotel quite late. I was exhausted, I was sweaty, I stank of cigarette smoke, I was awash with lager, I was stuffed with burgers, I felt that if I walked fast I would swish and fart at the same time, I felt as if I’d put on half a stone already. It was hardly an auspicious evening for a 55-year-old man to have sex with a woman for the very first time in his life.

Yet I was hopeful. Something that day had changed our relationship. Something had made me ready to make love to my woman, as men did the world over.

‘I’ve laid out some cold meats and a bottle of red,’ Viv told us.

‘Bless,’ said Ange.

‘I’ll leave you two love birds alone.’

She winked at us. It’s pathetic, I know, and cold and snobbish and pompous and altogether most regrettable, but I have always hated people winking at me.

‘Bless,’ said Ange.

We sat at a corner table. The bar was quite lively, mainly with people from the darts who were staying in the pub’s four bedrooms or having a quick one on their way home or to their posh hotels.

I forced down as much of the food as I could manage. Viv had enough problems without my hurting her feelings. It did occur to me that love – love? Why did that word keep cropping up? It was the wrong word, but I was too tired to think of the right word – had turned me into a strange mixture, a man who could have fantasies about killing his mother but who didn’t want to hurt the feelings of a pub landlady who had winked at him.

Ange finished all her food, and most of the rest of mine.

She had given me a wonderful cue for the subjects that I needed to discuss with her, but I felt that I couldn’t take her up on it until we were in bed. I couldn’t say what I needed to say with Viv casting glances at us to see how we were getting on.

At last the wine was finished.

‘Not bad,’ said Ange, ‘but not as good as that Liebfraumilch.’

Don’t laugh. She was right. I didn’t know how my digestion would stand a whole week of Viv’s wine. I would need a pack of red, white and blue Rennies.

We went up the creaking stairs to Bedfordshire, as my mother

used to say, and we both took a shower. The shower dribbled like an old man's prick. Hardly a good omen. The trickle of water went cold and scalding by turns. While Ange was in the shower, I put the condoms in the drawer at my side of the bed, on top of the Gideon Bible. The drawer didn't shut properly.

At last we were in bed, naked in the darkness, my darts groupie and I.

'Ange,' I whispered, 'you never actually called Craig Normanton Nineteens, did you?'

'No.'

'You never called Geraint Thomas Tons, did you?'

'No.'

A lorry thundered through the street outside. The whole building shook. God, this was a dodgy place for passionate love-making.

'I would guess that you never ever called Bent Sorensen Shanghai.'

'Well, no, not to his face.'

'That was all a little fantasy.'

'No harm in it, is there? No law against it?'

'Of course not. It's rather nice.'

I put my arms round her and pulled her towards me.

I felt her body stiffen.

I stiffened too. She would feel it in a minute.

It's only now, writing about it, that I realise what happened that night. I was feeling sorry for Ange. I was upset that Nineteens Normanton had mocked her and Tons Thomas had been embarrassed by her.

I felt sorry for her, I felt angry on her behalf, I stopped thinking about myself for perhaps the first time in my life, and all my inhibition left me.

I moved over to let her feel my prick, hard and large.

I heard her gasp of astonishment.

'Alan!'

I told her about the World Cup condoms. She said that she had told me that she was on the pill. I remembered then. I could have spared myself all that agony in the toilet.

She helped me into her. She was so helpful that I didn't feel any worry about my inexperience. I entered her, I kissed her almost violently, and I began, there in that pub, to catch up with life and banish more than thirty years of sterile manhood. It hurt. I wasn't

used to it, and it really did hurt, but the pain was wonderful. I had not known that any sensation could be so wonderful. I was too astonished to ask her if it had been good for her, but, from what she said, I think it must have been.

‘Bleedin’ ’ell,’ she said.

In the context, that was *definitely* the nicest thing that anybody had ever said to me.

SEVENTEEN

I FELT SO happy the next day. A bit proud of myself too. Perhaps you will allow me that.

Were there moments on the next long day of darts when I wondered if it had all been a dream? No, that is the language of sentimentality. Of course I knew it had been real. It had been the most intensely real experience I'd ever had.

As I drove to the Happy Valley Country Club, I wished with great fervour that we were not going there, but to some glorious place where I could show her some of the beautiful things of life. Athens, perhaps, where modern philosophy can be said to have begun, more than two thousand five hundred years ago.

I parked without difficulty, we were early, and this time I made sure I kept well away from the Players' Entrance.

Or Paris, where we could retrace the steps of Jean Paul Sartre, who never played for Arsenal.

Ange showed our tickets and we made our way through the half-filled room to our table.

Or Venice, the most beautiful city in the world. A Bellini overlooking the Grand Canal.

'Two pints of lager, please.'

For a moment I felt very close to Venice. I too had that sinking feeling. How could I survive another day of darts and lager?

Rome, perhaps, where I could show her the ruins of Ancient Rome, the power of the Vatican and the wonders of the Renaissance. Maybe the Eternal City had more variety than anywhere. I would show her so much. We'd begin to have really stimulating conversations.

'Hiya, Ange.'

'Hiya, Ange.'

'Hiya, Brad. Hiya, Em.'

'Hiya, Al.'

'Alan! They're saying "hiya".'

'Oh sorry. I was miles away. I was thinking about "hiya" things.'

Hello.'

I couldn't for the life of me remember their names.

I tried to think about the Ferdinand Brinsley. Perhaps I could look as if I was glued to the darts, but in fact do some useful work, deep in my head, on the subject of Chance.

'Let's play darts.'

No chance. I had to admit to myself that I had lost all interest in the Ferdinand Brinsley. 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein', that was different, that was the work on which my whole reputation would depend. Maybe I could make some progress on that, while apparently concentrating on the matches.

'Game on. Best of order.'

It was no use. All the thoughts that came to my mind were negative ones. Maybe in fact my reputation depended on my not publishing my book. If it was really based on false premises, there wasn't any point in thinking about it here in these licensed premises.

'He was flying in that leg.'

Ange had spoken. What had she said? There's a fly on his leg? Whose leg?

'Sorry?'

'I said he was flying in that leg. A nine-dart game. First of the week.'

'Ah.' It wasn't enough. I needed to show some interest. It wasn't enough just to say 'Ah.'

'What's a nine-dart game?'

'From 501 to finishing bull or double in no more than nine darts. You can't do it in less.'

'Ah.'

It was no use. I couldn't conduct philosophical investigations while keeping one ear open for a remark from Ange, or while being ready at all times to leap up with my board that stated 180. Maybe I could amuse myself by thinking of my past flirtations, of what I would be doing now if I had gone off with my Swiss lacrosse player, or the florist from Littlehampton, or had drifted into a sexless marriage with Rachel, of how fortunate I was to have led such a dismal, lonely life, because, if I hadn't, I wouldn't be here now.

But I wanted to be here less than anywhere else on earth.

No distractions worked. The only solution was to let my mind go completely blank. Mystics could do it. Orientals could do it. Posh

Spice could do it.

I couldn't.

I smiled to myself. Ange had been amazed once when I had mentioned Posh Spice. She didn't think I would have heard of her, but even I had heard of the Beckhams. There was no escape from some things, even in Oxford.

Oh God. Ange had spoken.

'Sorry. What?'

'His problem is he's started thinking.'

'What? Sorry?'

'Oh, Alan, you don't listen to a word I say. I said, "his problem is he's started thinking."'

'I heard you. It's just that I didn't understand.'

'Oh. Well, he's an instinctive player, inne?'

For a moment I thought his name must be Inne, then I realised that Ange was saying, 'Isn't he?' I wondered about writing a paper on 'Elision in Popular Culture', and I missed the next thing Ange said as well.

'Sorry? What?'

'Oh, Alan.'

'Sorry.'

'I said, "When he starts thinking he's well and truly buggered."'

'Ah. I'd be no use then.'

'We know that.'

'I think I've got Thinkitis.'

'What?'

'You talked about Dartitis. I can't get going on anything. I'm a bag of nerves. It could be Thinkitis.'

'Oh, Alan! You shouldn't be thinking here. You should switch off and have a rest and enjoy the darts, right?'

'Sorry.'

I had the third burger of my life, calculating that the statistical chance of getting CJD was minimal, and again I managed to make two pints of lager last all day.

During a brief interval between matches, Tons Thomas appeared, wandering among the crowd, chatting. Craig's bulk was all muscle, Tons's stomach was pure fat. His beer belly was huge. I felt Ange grow tense, and I saw Tons register that he was approaching our table and turn in a different direction. Something strange was going on between Ange and these darts players. I began to give the matter

some serious thought, curing myself of my Thinkitis at a stroke. I thought of an explanation which, if correct, might explain what was puzzling me.

It was an explanation that I would welcome with all my heart. I needed to know if it was correct. Our whole relationship might depend on it. I needed to ask a question, and I knew who I needed to ask. I planned my course of action. I was going to have to do something that was so unlike me that, even as I stood up to go and do it, I could hardly believe it was going to happen. The things that love can make you do. There was that word again. No. Surely not? A man in my profession should know that he must use words more carefully.

I stood up.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I need to stretch my legs. Won’t be long.’

I wove through the forest of tables, in and out of the lagered throng. I asked the way to the players’ section, and approached it.

It was guarded, of course.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I’m a great friend of Mr Sorensen. Could I see him?’

I gave my name as Sir Alan Calcutt. Once you’ve told the first lie, the second one is easy. Ange would have been so proud of me. The pity of it was that I would never be able to tell her.

I didn’t know what I was going to say. I would have to play it by ear, I who had never played anything by ear in my life. That was how strong my need for knowledge was.

He came, looking uncertain.

‘Do I know you, Sir Alan?’ he said in almost perfect English.

‘No.’

‘Oh? I was told a great friend wished to speak to me.’

‘No. There must have been confusion. I said, “A friend of a great friend.” Ange Bedwell.’

He looked incredulous and blank at the same time – no mean feat.

‘Ange Bedwell?’

‘Dark hair. Dimple on her chin. Sits near the front. Comes every year.’

‘Oh. Yes. Yes, I know who you mean,’ he said, ‘but she is not a friend. We have spoken, yes. I think I signed her souvenir programme once. What is this?’

He was politely irritated, and I didn’t blame him.

'I'm so sorry,' I said, but I wasn't, I was filled with joy. I knew that he was telling the truth. There was no reason for him not to, and nobody could have feigned the astonishment he was showing. 'Forgive me for wasting your time. There's been a misunderstanding. I've been misinformed. I hope you win tonight.'

As I walked away, I was aware of him, staring at me. I didn't care. My heart was singing. I went back to my seat. The darts continued. Now I found it easy to sit there and think my private thoughts, because they were such happy thoughts, and to make the right noises about the darts while I was thinking them. Now, for the first time, I *knew* that I was in love. I could never have pretended to be Sir Alan Calcutt otherwise. I was in love, and I was in love with a fantasist. I knew now that she was a figure of fun at the darts, that the players and their friends laughed at her for her devotion, her excitement, her obsession. I didn't yet know why she was like that, but one day – 'nice arrows' – I might. I knew that I didn't mind. Mind? I was thrilled. No one reason can cause someone to be attracted to another, go out with them, fall in love with them, but I knew now that a major factor in our coming together was that – 'One Hundred and Eighteeee!' – we were both suffering from low self-esteem. That was a condition that had not been identified in my young days. Was I right in suspecting that, once a condition has been identified, more people suffer from it than in the days before it was known?

'You were very quiet today,' said Ange as I drove back to the pub through the growing twilight.

'I was concentrating on the darts.'

She gave me a dubious look. It was not the most successful of the day's many lies.

I drove on in silence, desperate not to be silent. I could think of nothing to say. Luckily Ange could.

'Wouldn't it be funny if things could talk?'

'What things?'

'Any things. Tables. Chairs. That lamp post, jabbering away.'

'I don't think a lamp post would have anything very illuminating to say.'

'Nice one. Like it. Coming on.'

The praise was absurd, but it excited me. I felt a burgeoning erection. I couldn't wait to get Ange to bed. I couldn't wait to have another orgasm. But first we had to eat our supper and drink our

wine. 'Sleep well last night?' asked Viv with a wink, and I had to smile and pretend to be amused.

And so to bed. It was better still that night. I was more . . . people who know me won't believe this . . . but I was more laid back. I didn't think of my pleasure. I thought of hers. I worked on her body, her lips, her nipples . . . all my movements were geared to the stimulation of her most sensitive bits. I gasped with joy to hear her groaning with pleasure. I didn't think of myself at all, and, as a result, I had a sharper pleasure than I had ever had in my life. There's quite a lesson, there, perhaps, for matters of sex, and, dare I say it, for life itself.

'Wow!' said Ange. 'I always thought we'd find somethink you was good at if we went on long enough.'

It was the quarter-final between Craig Normanton and Geraint Thomas that began it. I knew that, although they both might have laughed at Ange, Geraint had done it in a more gentle and kindly way. He pitied her, which was not nice, while Craig despised her, which was very nasty.

I so much wanted Geraint to win, and, as a result, I watched the game quite closely, and, as a result of that, I began to be hooked.

My mother's eyes aren't good enough, nowadays, to watch the snooker, but until two years ago she had watched it with enormous interest. I could feel now, for the first time, some of the reasons why. It was curiously calming to become agitated about something so unimportant and so far removed from one's own life. I once tried to talk to her about global warming and she said, 'Ronnie's been on a hot streak all week.' I didn't know what she meant. She explained, as to an idiot, that there was a snooker player called Ronnie O'Sullivan and he was in a rich vein of form. I had managed to avoid a sudden temptation to yawn. Now I realised why she was more interested in Ronnie O'Sullivan's hot streaks than in global warming. She knew that there was every likelihood that she would live to see the result, and that was comforting.

Geraint needed 133 to win the set. I could hear my heart beating.

'He'll go for the treble nineteen first, then the treble twenty, and then the double eight,' said Ange excitedly. 'I know the way his mind works.'

He did, and got them. The crowd . . . well . . . they erupted.

I erupted!

In the very final game of their match, when Craig got a maximum, Brad and Em leapt up with their 180 boards. Ange and I remained seated. Even at our table, the rivalry was intense.

Then Geraint was the first to have a chance of a three-dart finish, and he achieved it.

The place . . . well, frankly, and this won't surprise you, I know . . . erupted. Ange and I hugged. Brad and Em looked deeply disappointed.

They stood up, and we had the most meaningful conversation we'd had with them during those three days.

'We have to go,' said Brad. 'I'm in Runcorn tomorrow.'

'That's it for us. We only had three days,' said Em.

'Bye, Ange. Bye, Al,' said Brad.

'Bye, Ange. Bye, Al,' said Em.

'Bye, Brad. Bye, Em,' said Ange.

'Goodbye, and good luck, and have a wonderful time in Runcorn,' I said.

All three of them looked at me in astonishment.

I had thought that after this titanic struggle my interest would wane, but it didn't. I was almost sad when the day's matches ended.

In the car on the way home, I said, 'I've been thinking about what you said about what things would say if they could speak.'

She was pleased.

'You've been thinking about something that I said? That's a first.'

'I've been working out what a darts board would say.'

'Oh yeah? Lots of long words and philosophical thoughts that I wouldn't understand?'

'Not exactly.'

'Well what would it say?'

'Ouch.'

She laughed.

'You really are coming on, Alan,' she said.

I came on that night too. It was such a joy to me to know that she hadn't slept with any of the darts players. I never told her that I knew, never asked her why she'd lied. I didn't need to. I knew. It had made her feel important for a few moments, and now I had the privilege of making her feel important all the time.

The next two days were among the happiest of my life so far. To my astonishment, my enjoyment of the darts grew and grew. The

excitement in that vast bar was infectious. Leaping up with one's sign saying 180 became an enjoyable ritual. I even began to enjoy the lager, and the players had become familiar to me. I liked some more than others. I cared who won.

I felt a bit ashamed of this, but that didn't spoil my enjoyment. What had been unbelievably tedious was now filled with tension. I was almost sorry when the days ended. Not quite, because the nights proved as good as ever. The man in the room below me shook my hand at breakfast on the last morning, and said, 'I salute you.' I couldn't believe it. I had never known I had it in me, both metaphorically and physically.

Bent Sorensen lost in the semi-finals, but Geraint won an epic match against the burly Dutch giant, Franz Van Ijsselmeer. There were two Dutch fans sharing our table that day, and I got a little embarrassed by Ange's patriotic fervour – I tried to be more restrained – but they didn't seem to mind, and cheered equally fervently for their man. Geraint took a four-set lead in the nine-set match, but was then pegged back to four all, before shading the decider. 'Shading the decider'! See how rapidly I was picking up the lingo.

At the end of the day's play, we hung around in the bar. Neither of us wanted to leave. Tomorrow would be the final day, and we would have wanted it to go on for ever. I couldn't believe it.

Geraint Thomas . . . or Tons Thomas as I still preferred to think of him . . . wandered through from the players' area to meet some friends. As he passed close to us, Ange called out, 'Good luck tomorrow, Geraint.'

'Thanks, Ange,' he said, and I was pleased that he had remembered her name, and he gave her a little kiss too, and I was pleased about that as well.

'Yes, may I add my hopes for a favourable outcome tomorrow,' I said. 'I've admired your performances and they deserve to be crowned with the ultimate success.'

He looked at me, astounded, and moved off to join his friends.

In the car, on the way back to the pub, Ange said, 'Well, you've got to hand something to darts. Your philosophy, three thousand years of talk, you still haven't had a result. Darts, you get one in less than an hour every time.'

Finals day. Tons Thomas was playing a rather uncharismatic young

man from the Midlands. How desperately I wanted Tons to win. How absurd that was.

The match was played over eleven sets, and all the time Ange was coming out with comments. 'A neatly accumulated ton.' 'Tons is not on song.' 'Good adjustment.' 'Steady as a rock.' 'The wheels have fallen off.'

In the third set, with the match evenly poised and Geraint with a one-dart chance of a finishing double twenty, I suddenly heard myself yelling. 'Come on, Tons.' I was appalled.

The mighty Welshman paused, turned, glared. Then I thought that he saw who it was and almost smiled, but I couldn't be sure of that.

There came a great scream of 'Best of order, please. Please do not shout when the players are taking their throws.'

Hundreds of people were glaring at me. Every single person in that enormous room was staring at me. I went bright red. Ange was looking at me too, but there was great affection in with the horror. She was thrilled that I cared so much.

Geraint calmed himself, steadied himself, and threw his third dart in the double twenty.

It all depended on the very final game of the very final set, as we had suspected it would. We felt almost unbearably tense. What was the point of feeling such tension over something so unimportant?

Tons got a maximum. We leapt up with our boards for the last time, screaming 'One Hundred and Eighteeee.' The Midlander got a maximum, and we sat glumly while his supporters rose and showed their boards.

Tons's opponent was the first to have a possible three-dart finish.

'This is the greatest pressure you can feel,' said Ange, now in unstoppable commentator mode. 'In the pressure cooker that is the Happy Valley Country Club, only the bravest will triumph.'

The young man from Walsall missed his double twenty, his final dart sliding into the five.

Tons scored a steady 120, leaving him 89 to win.

The Midlander needed 35, but his first dart bounced back most unluckily off the wire.

'Has Lady Luck deserted him in his hour of need?' asked Ange rhetorically, though she didn't know that she was being rhetorical.

His second dart landed safely in the middle of the three. Double sixteen to win. Ange clutched my sleeve.

The dart just missed the double and thudded into the single sixteen. Double eight to win.

Could Tons finish it off? Our hearts were pumping in unison. Philosophy was never like this.

Nineteen – 70 to win. Ange was silent now.

Bull's eye. A brave arrow. Fifty. Double ten to win. For an awful moment I thought that I was going to shout out again. Ange must have thought the same. She clutched my sleeve.

He missed.

The Midlander got double eight with his first dart. We had lost. We? Well, that was how it felt.

There was an enormous sense of shared anticlimax, and I was so exhausted that I feared that we would share another anticlimax back at the pub.

As we let the human tide propel us towards the exit, Ange suddenly buried her face in mine and said, 'Kiss me.'

I obeyed. It was pleasant to kiss her. We stopped and became a little human island, with people passing on both sides of us, some of them giving wolf-whistles. I had no idea why we were doing this, but I knew that there was some reason.

At last she looked up, cautiously.

'I think he's gone,' she said.

'Gone?'

'Yes.'

'Who?'

'My dad.'

'What??'

'I saw my dad. I shouldn't be that surprised. He loved darts.'

'But . . . you told me your father was dead.'

'Dead for me, Alan. That's what I meant. Pissed off when I was fifteen, didn't he? All that talk of loving me, of my being his favourite, all that cradling me on his knee – the bastard pissed off one Monday and never even sent a fucking Christmas card. Oh, sorry.'

'Forgivable under the circumstances, Ange. Oh, Ange.'

'I still hate sodding bloody Mondays.'

It occurred to me later that I could have been angry that Ange had lied, but by now I accepted her exactly as she was. I suspected that it might be possible that she was slightly mad. That didn't worry me. Why should it? I suspected that by now I was slightly

mad as well.

There was no anticlimax in the pub after all.

EIGHTEEN

MY TIME AT the darts had been quite a culture shock for me, but had made such an impression on me that I now found *Oxford* to be a culture shock. My dry, dignified bachelor rooms were a culture shock. I felt that I no longer belonged there. I felt that I didn't want to belong there any more. I knew, of course, that this feeling would fade, but I didn't want it to.

The telephone rang. I hoped it would be Ange, telling me what a wonderful lover I was, and asking if she could come up to Oxford straightaway, instead of waiting to join me for the Ferdinand Brinsley as we had arranged.

It wasn't Ange. It was Lawrence.

'Ah! You're back,' he said.

'Your deductive powers are as strong as ever, Lawrence.'

No! I couldn't afford to be like that with Lawrence.

'Are you better?'

'Much better, thank you. I was quite ill for a few days.'

'Well, I'm glad you're on the mend. Alan . . .?'

'Did you manage to rearrange everything?' I had asked Lawrence to rearrange my lecture and supervisions.

'Well, yes. Eventually. Alan, I wondered if you could pop over.'

'Certainly. When?'

'As soon as possible, Alan.'

I took a taxi to Kierkegaard. It would be quicker than going to the garage for the Mem Saab.

As I rang the bell, I realised that I was dreading seeing Jane again. I really had been very rude to her last time. I wasn't sure how I should behave towards her, whether to ignore the matter or apologise.

But it was Lawrence who came to the door.

'Come in, Alan. Jane's out, you'll be relieved to hear.'

I was surprised by that. He had shown no previous ability as a mind reader.

He led me into the sitting room, but didn't invite me to sit down.

He remained standing. I wanted to sit down, I felt suddenly very weary, all the week's activities had taken a lot out of me, but I felt that I couldn't sit: Lawrence looked very . . . very official. This was a Head of Department, not a friend.

'Are you still seeing that girl?' he asked.

'Isn't that rather my business?' I asked.

'Aren't I permitted to ask a simple question?' he asked.

'Are you trying to emulate Mallard and do nothing but ask questions?' I asked.

'Isn't it rather you who are emulating young Mallard?' he asked.

'Do you always refer to him as young Mallard in order to remind me that I am older than both of you?' I asked.

I have spared you from meeting Mallard so far. He irritates me and he would irritate you. He adopts an air of superiority which you cannot prick because he offers you no opportunity to prick it, the prick. He never tells me what he is thinking, just questions me about what I am thinking.

'Don't change the subject,' said Lawrence. 'Have you really been ill, or have you been to the World Darts Championship with that girl?'

'Do I really have to answer that?'

'No. I watched a bit of it on television. Well, I was curious to see what possible appeal there could be in it. I failed to find any, but I saw you in that great crowd, Alan. I saw you with her.'

I didn't reply. I thought of saying, 'It's a fair cop, guv,' as one of Lawrence's hopelessly old-fashioned criminals would say in the Inspector Didcot Mysteries, but this wasn't the time to be provocative.

'You lied to me. You repaid twenty years of friendship and support with a lie.'

I had to speak now.

'I'm very, very sorry, Lawrence,' I said, 'and only something as wonderful and powerful as love would have caused me to do it.'

He looked astonished, as well, I suppose, he might.

'You love that girl?'

'Frankly, Lawrence, I find your tone of incredulity offensive. Yes, I do.'

'Do you still only want her for her mind?'

'I wouldn't say so, no. Most definitely not.'

I couldn't avoid giving a rather childish smirk, not that I tried

very hard to avoid it.

‘Ah.’

‘Lawrence, I can only apologise again for misleading you. I didn’t like doing it and I won’t do it again.’

He didn’t look at me, didn’t meet my eyes, and in that split second a memory came back to me, a memory of a scene in the only book of his that I’d managed to finish, a scene in which an elderly woman is killed by a poisoned cake. I recoiled from this dreadful thought, dreadful at any time and inconvenient at this moment. I also recalled a conversation with Mallard, in which he had used that wretched phrase, ‘A moment in time,’ and I had said, ‘As opposed to a moment in marzipan, do you mean?’ It’s strange how one’s mind races when one’s panicking, and yes, I was panicking, because I suspected what all this was leading up to.

‘I think, Alan, for your own sake, you shouldn’t deliver the Ferdinand Brinsley. I don’t think you’re in a fit state.’

I should have felt relief. The thing was a black cloud building and moving towards me. I had no faith in myself to deliver an effective lecture. I was off the hook – but I wasn’t so far gone in my love for Ange that I wished to end the only way I had of making money, and, to be fair to myself, the only way I had of making a contribution to the world of philosophy. I pinned no great faith now in ‘Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein’. If I was taken off the Ferdinand Brinsley, it would be the end of the road for the philosopher who hadn’t fulfilled his early promise.

‘I see,’ I said. ‘And who is to deliver it?’

I didn’t do my cause much good by asking such an unnecessary question.

‘Young Mallard. It’s time he spread his wings.’

‘Has he an original thought in his head, Lawrence?’

‘Have you looked at his website?’

‘Very good. Nice one, Lawrence.’

‘What?’

‘Mallard. Website.’

Lawrence looked at me in utter astonishment.

‘I wasn’t joking, Alan. I don’t joke to you. You don’t do jokes, and this is no laughing matter. Young Mallard is feeling his way in the world, but he’s the coming man, Alan, and we both have to recognise that fact. It’s time we threw him in at the deep end. Incidentally, you should have a website.’

I felt so tired just at the thought of creating a website. Nothing could have brought home to me more clearly that I was finished, washed up.

‘I resign.’

That would shock him. He wouldn’t expect me to be so brave.

‘I accept your resignation.’

What would I do with the rest of my life? What else could I do? I realised in that moment that Ange wouldn’t want me under her feet the whole time, padding around in my retirement.

I was staring at the abyss.

‘I withdraw my resignation.’

I didn’t feel proud at that moment, but one had to be a realist.

It was such a strain conducting this whole conversation standing up in a room filled with so many comfortable chairs and sofas. Standing up made it such a stiff confrontation. I longed to sit down. I longed to wander out through the French windows and lounge on Lawrence’s immaculate lawn. It was a lovely summer’s day.

‘Alan! Your association with that girl, your obsession, your attitude towards your work, your attitude towards Jane and me. I feel pretty sure I could get you a sabbatical next year. A year off, Alan, to recharge the batteries.’

‘What would I do with a year’s sabbatical?’

‘Follow the sun. Take a world cruise. See exotic places. Take that girl if you must. Reinvigorate yourself. Come back refreshed, seeing things in proportion. This has been building up for some time, Alan. I’ve watched it.’

Ange knew that I wasn’t washed up. I had adapted to her. I’d even bought a pair of jeans. Surely I could face the challenge of a website? Surely I could see off the threat posed by young Mallard?

‘Well, if you don’t want it . . .’

‘I didn’t say that, Lawrence. I don’t *need* it, but I do want it. I accept your offer. Wait until “that girl” hears about this. Thanks, Lawrence.’

We shook hands and I went to the door. I should have left the room with calm dignity. What I did was wrong. I turned and I said to Lawrence, from the doorway of his irritatingly tidy living room, ‘Young Mallard’s a phoney. Young Mallard’s a quack.’

‘You’re not well, Alan.’

I flapped my arms.

‘Quack quack quack,’ I said.

I don't have as many messages for the world as you might expect from a man who has studied the great philosophers for thirty-eight years, but here's one good piece of advice. If you are attempting to stand on your dignity, don't do duck impressions.

NINETEEN

‘I’VE LOOKED IN bird books and stuff and they don’t tell me the sort of thing I really want to know.’

We were sitting outside a restaurant in Trastevere, the oldest part of what it seems ridiculous to call modern Rome, since it is all old. All around us, in the narrow streets and alleys, there were crowded restaurants and bars. All around us, in the velvet night, there was the buzz of happy conversation. There was no sign of the aggression that is so near the surface in British cities.

‘I mean, you know, it’s nice to know what birds are and be able to say, “flippin’ ’eck, that’s a lesser spotted twig-cruncher”, but I’m not that bothered whether I know what they are or not.’

It was so typical of Ange that she should waffle on about bird life in the middle of a great ancient city, with not a bird in sight except on a plate. I had to fight with myself to remain calm, not to feel irritated. We had eaten a very typical Roman meal, a great array of antipasti followed by lamb cacciatora. I had insisted that she tried local specialities. It was the one demand I made upon her.

‘I mean, it’s enough for me that it’s a bird and it’s lovely, whatever it’s called. It’s the same with those buildings you’ve been showing me.’

We hadn’t done much sight-seeing yet. We had only arrived that afternoon, but as we wandered from the hotel to find somewhere typical to eat, I had ventured a few remarks about the age and style of the buildings. I had talked about the mathematical principles that underpinned Renaissance architecture, about the joys of proportion. I had touched on this in Oxford, and now I had been testing her, to see if she remembered. I don’t think she did. ‘It’s better than Romford, I’ll give you that,’ she had commented. Over our drinks – she had a beer, I a negroni – in the delightful Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere, I had talked of Michelangelo and of Palladio, and his influence on the English country house. But now she was talking about birds.

‘I mean, I don’t need to know how many eggs they lay and what

size the eggs are and what colour they are and that.'

She had said, in the plane, that she had cried when I had told her that I wasn't going to be giving the Ferdinand Brinsley Memorial Lecture after all. That had moved me deeply.

'I mean I'd really like to know what it feels like to be a bird. Do they see colour as the same colour as we do?'

I had booked the Rome trip without telling her, sprung it on her as a surprise when she came to stay the night in my rooms. She had squealed with delight and showered me with kisses.

Now it was as if she wasn't even noticing where she was. We were having a conversation that we could have had in Oxford.

I had to be careful not to get irritated with her. Our trip would fail completely if I showed even the slightest sign of irritation. And why should I? Her thoughts were fascinating, and I was not her teacher.

What saved the trip was that I had never been to Rome either, and the sheer majesty and history of it astonished me as much as it astonished her. And it did astonish her. The city gripped her. It was almost too vast, I realised, for her to comprehend. I decided to approach it through some of its smaller, less known treasures. There was a storm on the second day, and we sheltered in the art gallery of the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, a great palace and a beautiful, elegant, intimate gallery. I had been told by a colleague that, whatever we saw in Rome, we must see the portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velasquez. It was in a little room, accompanied only by a Bernini bust of the same man. 'I feel as though I bleeding well know him,' said Ange. 'Hi, Popey.' A couple looked round at her in horror, but I squeezed her arm and loved her more than ever.

It was the Caravaggio that she really liked: not his famous *Rest during the Flight into Egypt*, but the picture of a young woman next to it, the *Maddalene Penitente*, a girl sexy rather than beautiful, almost ugly in the sullen misery of her personal reformation – she had been a prostitute, as was shown by the clothes she was wearing.

'She's alive,' Ange said. 'I can feel her misery. I feel like that sometimes.'

Ange Penitente. I liked the thought. I even felt that it was not entirely irrelevant.

When we left the Palazzo, we walked to the Piazza Della Rotonda, and visited the Pantheon, the world's oldest building still in use. To

my astonishment I found tears springing to my eyes at the thought of all the years that great building had seen, and Ange was in awe too. She gawped at the great pillars. Her eyes widened at the scale of the dome and the rain splashing down from the hole at its top, the oculus, which provided the only light. She couldn't believe that it had been built by the Emperor Hadrian in AD118–125. I held her tight and felt her shiver with excitement.

We hurried to a bar in the square, and sat there, snug under an awning, as the rain continued to ping off the cobbles. An itinerant immigrant was trying to sell umbrellas. He was protecting himself with one that had two bare spikes poking out. We laughed, and Ange said, 'Would you buy a used umbrella off that man?' Orientals in plastic macs scurried across the square, still taking photographs. Waiters brought ice buckets to remove surplus water from the top surfaces of the awnings.

Ange said, 'I can't get over that girl in that picture. What an artist. He seemed so much more now than all the others, know what I mean? What was his name again?'

I explained that he was really Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, that Caravaggio was the town he came from and he had come to be known simply by that name.

'Gordon bloody Bennett,' she said. 'If I was really famous I could be known as Romford!' She went silent for a moment, and then she said, 'I might have done something in my life if I hadn't been born in Romford.'

'You still can,' I said. 'It isn't a terminal condition.'

But I think she thought it was.

We would have to go to the Trevi Fountain, but I had another fountain in mind. I had spotted it in the guide book and knew that Ange would like it. It was the small, exquisite Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Fountain of the Tortoises, in the tiny Piazza Mattei. I came upon it as if by accident, though it was deliberate, of course. I was quite surprised to find myself so devious.

It was not a large fountain. Four bronze youths each rested one foot on the head of a dolphin. Above the youths was the bowl of the fountain, and, a hundred years later, four perfectly sculpted little tortoises had been added. In a city full of such vast fountains, I think it was their smallness that particularly appealed to me. It looked as if the youths were pushing the tortoises into the bowl to have a drink. I thought Ange would adore the tortoises, but on this

occasion, as on others, I was naïve.

‘What beautiful boys,’ she said, and it was my turn to shiver.

Neither of us took a camera to Rome. We were almost the only tourists not to be snapping away. It was enough for us to look, and Ange did look. We both loved the gentle colours of the palaces and houses – the ochres and russets and burnt siennas, never anything brash or intrusive. I even grew used to the ever-present graffiti. Rather like Ange’s tattoo, they spared us from the burden of perfection.

Ange’s comments during those magical days in Rome were a mixture of the naïve and the shrewd, of the serious and the silly. I loved her so much that I loved them all.

As we stood in the crowds staring at the theatrical excesses of the Trevi Fountain, I ventured a bit of historical detail – I had to be careful not to sound like an Oxford don. I explained that the site marked the terminal of the Aqua Virgo aqueduct built in 19BC, but the fountain itself was only completed in 1762.

‘I know they had problems with their builders at number sixty-seven,’ she said, ‘but that’s ridiculous.’

Later that day she described a tiny human tragedy with such economy and style that I wanted to kiss her there and then. Referring to a spectacularly unhelpful attendant in a museum cloakroom, she said, ‘She doesn’t smile cos nobody leaves her any money, and nobody leaves her any money cos she doesn’t smile.’

I made a mistake on the third morning. I bought an English newspaper. I read of widespread outrage that our soldiers in Afghanistan were paid two pounds a day. I read of some snivelling footballer on £50,000 a week who was complaining that nobody loved him. I felt such anger at our society and its values, and I felt anger at myself for being so unpolitical, so academic, so craven. I looked at Ange and I knew that while it was permissible to spoil my holidays, I mustn’t spoil hers. I forced my anger to subside, and put the paper in a bin.

I booked two guided tours, one to the Colosseum and Forum, the other to St Peter’s and the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Museums. I booked them with an Irish outfit I’d found on the internet, and I did so purely in order to avoid the queues, but it was a good move. Ange was hugely impressed over my use of the internet, and the

Irish girl who took us round was delightful. I could not have explained things to Ange without sounding like the lecturer I was. This girl brought everything to life, and turned me into a student.

She peopled the Forum with the ancient Romans and Ange was fascinated. The guide told us that there was a theory that Julius Caesar had arranged his death because he was suffering from arthritis and the medicine he took for it was causing him to lose his memory. He was a proud man who wanted to die in strength and not in weakness.

‘Julius Caesar, President Kennedy, Princess Di,’ whispered Ange. ‘Some truths are too important ever to be known.’

I was astonished by her perception. Five minutes later she was laughing like a schoolgirl at the sight of a nun eating a huge pistachio ice cream. That was Ange.

I found the Forum and the Colosseum exciting, but also sobering. Here were the relics of a civilisation that had become decadent and crumbled. I thought about my morning newspaper and about our civilisation. It wasn’t hard to feel depressed. Thank goodness Ange was there, to make such thought impermissible. On with the motley.

The Sistine Chapel is so famous, and so crowded, and it’s such a performance to get to it, that when one is there it is extremely difficult to do justice to it. It’s the ceiling that everybody comments on, but the walls are also covered with great paintings. There was far too much to absorb in the fifteen minutes that we were allowed. There was a man whose job it was to say ‘S’ssh!’ every twenty seconds all day every day, and another man with a gravelly voice calling out ‘No photo’ at intervals. It was all too much for Ange and she giggled. I understood but I hated it. She nudged me and whispered, ‘One of life’s great losers.’

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘The man who designed the floor of the Sistine Chapel.’

It was a funny thought, I had to admit that, but we only had eleven minutes left to admire all this great art. It wasn’t the time for jokes. I took great care to hide my irritation, though.

After the Sistine Chapel I found it difficult to respond to St Peter’s Basilica. ‘Enormous’ was the only word that sprang to my mind. Our guide showed us the tombs of several Popes, and I could feel nothing.

Ange must have been feeling the same, because she said, ‘I’m a

bit popped out, know what I mean?’ and I was able to say, ‘Yes, Ange, I know exactly what you mean.’

We wandered back across the Tiber with its elegant, restrained stone bridges, and drifted as if pulled by a magnet into the more secular atmosphere of the Piazza Navona, one of the liveliest of all Rome’s great . . . I was going to say ‘squares’, but none of them are square . . . piazzas. The streets of Rome can be rather dark and stern. Their beauty is severe – and then one turns a corner, and there is a piazza, full of sunlight and life. All the piazzas are beautiful, and they all have at least one fountain, and most of them have an obelisk as well. I had to admit to myself, though not to Ange, that even my beloved Oxford paled.

We sat outdoors in one of the many cafés, and I realised that I hadn’t hidden my irritation in the Sistine Chapel quite well enough.

‘You were a bit pissed off with me in the Sistine Chapel,’ she said.

I didn’t reply.

‘I did like it,’ she said. ‘I thought it was fantastic. The Day of Judgment, wow. Cool.’

It was not the adjective I would have chosen, but I was pleased that she had been impressed.

‘I only looked at one or two panels in the ceiling cos there was too much, know what I mean?’ she said. ‘I liked that one where God is just going to breathe life into Adam. That was fantastic. Well, they all were. And him up there for years and getting it just right so we can see it. It would have been a great achievement even if everything he’d painted turned out to be a load of bollocks. But, you know it’s going to be fantastic and so when it is fantastic it’s difficult to be excited. If we was there alone, Alan. Oh, Alan, if we’d been there alone.’

I squeezed her hand. She sipped her negroni. I’d managed to persuade her to try one.

‘That geezer who kept going “S’ssh”,’ she said. ‘I wonder what his job interview was like. “Would you please say ‘S’ssh’ for me?” “S’sssh.” “Excellent. The job’s yours.”’

We walked slowly through the square, arm in arm in the fierce sun of early evening. Next day would be our last. Distant fear was beginning to corrupt my joy. We stood and looked at Bernini’s great Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi, in which four great rivers, the Ganges, the Danube, the Nile and the River Plate, are represented by four giants. I explained the symbolism, trying hard once again not to

sound donnish.

‘I don’t think things should need to be explained,’ she said. ‘I like art better when you don’t have to explain nothink.’

Next day we wandered along the Via Condotti, past the great elegant shops of the famous designers, and it never occurred to me – oh dear, how hard it is to admit this – it never occurred to me to offer to buy her something beautiful, something elegant, as a memento of this great trip. And I thought my mother was mean. I’d been a bachelor too long, and I would remain a bachelor if I went on like that. It was rather like the story of the unfriendly woman in the museum cloakroom.

A cripple with one stunted leg and one stunted arm stood in the middle of this street of money. None of the elegant people could bear to look at him or give him some coins, and, to my shame, neither could I. I thought that Ange would rebuke me, but she said, ‘I think the Catholic Church is rich enough to look after Rome’s beggars without our help, don’t you?’ Straight to the heart of things, our Ange.

We sat on the Spanish Steps, looking at tourists showing too much of the wrong kind of flesh.

‘Why do women with that fatty thing, not cholesterol, the other thing, sod it, I can’t think of the word, oh yes, that’s right, cellulite, wear such short shorts?’ she asked.

I felt an exhilarating sense of fun at that moment, under that cloudless Roman sky.

‘I don’t know,’ I said in a rather arch and indeed slightly triumphant tone. ‘Why do women with that fatty thing, not cholesterol, the other thing, sod it, I can’t think of the word, oh yes, that’s right, cellulite, wear such short shorts?’

‘It wasn’t a riddle,’ she said.

We leant on each other’s shoulders and laughed and laughed at our silliness. When the laughter had died away, I felt ashamed of the tourists, especially the American and English ones. The elegance of the Romans was a constant rebuke.

We drifted towards the Piazza del Popolo with its two huge churches and its obelisk in scaffolding. We stopped for lunch. Ange had a pizza, I had spaghetti alla carbonara, and I made another mistake. Conscious with sudden pain of its being the last lunch of our trip, I said, ‘I want to show you the world.’

‘I don’t want to be shown the world, Alan,’ she replied. ‘Then

there'd be nothing for me to discover.'

I was saddened by that remark, and at the time I didn't know why. I know now, of course. She had expressed the reason why our relationship could not last.

We climbed the hot steps from the Piazza del Popolo to the Pincio Gardens that afternoon, and there we found peace and blessed shade. We weren't only popped out. We were palaced out and fountained out and obelisked out. It had been wonderful, but we had seen all that we could digest.

There were tourist bicycles to hire, with two seats side by side and an awning for shade. Ange glanced at me, wondering if I would despise them. I paid for one, and we rode slowly round the wide paths under the merciful trees. There was a nineteenth-century water clock, designed by . . . somebody. I didn't need any more historical facts. The clock had lost its hands. There was no time here any more.

That timeless afternoon, after our sedate ride, we sat on a bench, and here, far, far from Gallows Corner, Ange began to talk.

'This is so beautiful, Alan,' she began. 'Sitting here, it's hard to believe that anything could be ugly, but it can, can't it, because my family, they're ugly.'

I knew that she was on the verge of intimate revelations, so, although I noticed her incorrect use of the word 'because', I didn't comment on it. I didn't say, 'No Ange, actually the reason why anything can be ugly is not because your family is ugly.'

'I had three brothers and a sister, right?'

'And the little one drowned.'

'Yeah. I wish my oldest brother had drowned. Bastard. My younger brother's bad enough, he's a tearaway. He's got an ASBO.'

She paused, and I felt that I must make some response.

'How many miles does it do to the gallon?' I asked.

She shook her head in amazement.

'An ASBO's an Anti-Social Behaviour Order,' she said. 'You must have heard of them. They serve them on hooligans and that. It puts restrictions on what they can do and where they can go and stuff.'

'I haven't heard of them. I don't think one has ever been put on anyone in the college. What did he do?'

'Nothing much, really. Nicked motor-bikes and charged round the neighbourhood at 2 a.m. on them before abandoning them. Broke

people's windows when he was pissed. Pulled up all the lupins in the park. Kids' stuff, mostly.'

'And your older brother's worse?'

'Oh yes. He married a girl when he was eighteen and she was seventeen. They ran away and got married. It broke Mum's heart. Like he was always her favourite. Mums are like that. They make the worst one their favourite, and it breaks their heart. I reckon they think a mother's love can redeem them, see, but nothing could redeem Tom. Only been married two months, he pisses off to Bicester for the weekend – only gets a girl pregnant, doesn't he? And she only goes and has twins, doesn't she? Never does anything by halves, Tom. Went berserk after a stag night, he knifed three people, only luck he never killed any of them. Wrote to us the week before he came out of prison, said he was looking forward to turning over a new life, he meant "leaf" of course, but we knew what he meant. We all went to the prison to greet him, except my dad of course, cos this was after he'd pissed off. We stood there, Mum was crying, my sister was crying cos my mum was crying, I was crying cos my mum and my sister were crying. Ben – he's the one drove the Asbo as you thought, I still can't hardly believe that – was scowling because we was all crying because he can't stand emotion, can't Ben, and there's this beat up old banger that we don't really notice. Well, we can't hardly see for crying, and it's raining too, of course, this was the wettest morning of our lives, and out comes Tom, strange, mad grin on his face, walks straight past us, gets in the old banger and is driven off. None of us has never seen nor heard of him from that day to this.'

She paused. Tears were streaming down her face. I put my arm round her and she shook silently. I have to admit that I had been wondering whether she was making this up. I mean, it just seemed to be too bad to be true, and she was a known, proven fantasist and liar. I just didn't believe that someone's life could be like this, and they could end up like her. But then there were these tears; could she possibly act as well as that? Well, again the answer had to be 'Yes'. The world is full of people who act out false lives with a brilliance that most of the members of Equity would envy.

So I sat there, in those gardens, wanting to believe and also wanting not to believe, wanting to have a reality in Ange's life to cling to, and wanting her not to have suffered as she said.

In the end I believed. In fact I got confirmation. I wouldn't be

telling her story to you if it wasn't true. There wouldn't be much point in telling you things that never happened.

'What about your sister?' I asked, when her sobs had subsided and she had blown her nose long and hard.

'She's . . . she has learning difficulties. She's in a Home now. Mum can't cope. I take her out every week when I'm at home, take her down the pub. We play darts. She isn't any good, of course. She has throwing difficulties. I love her, Alan. She never has a bad thought. Never has many thoughts, I suppose, but those she has are good. Why have very handicapped people sometimes got only good thoughts while very privileged people are complete fucking bastards?'

I knew this time that it wasn't a riddle, and I had more sense than to rebuke her for the f word.

I looked round the park, drank in the view, let Ange rest a little before the next instalment.

'I could understand my dad pissing off,' she resumed, 'even though a lot of it was his fault – p'r'aps *because* a lot of it was his fault – but never wanting to see us again ever, never even sending a sodding card . . .'

I could feel the hurt dripping off her like sweat.

She still had a tale to tell, there was still one more villain to come.

'I've only ever had one real boyfriend. D'you know, Alan, I can't bring myself to mention his name to you. My mum liked him cos he had very neat hair. Course he did. He'd just come out of the nick, hadn't he? He used to beat me up.'

'Oh, Ange.'

'I left him twice.'

'Why on earth did you go back?'

'You don't know nuthink really, do you? Girls always go back, Alan. Boys say they're sorry, they'll never do it again, girls believe them cos they want to believe them. My friend did it and I thought, how could she be so stupid? But *I* did it. You want to believe, Alan. You haven't got nothink else. He said he'd really try to control his temper. Then one day, we was in a pub, we was on vodka shots, and suddenly my blood ran cold, Alan. Suddenly I realised. He never hit me where it showed. I've got goose-pimples telling you now, here in all this heat. I've gone cold all over. Feel me.'

I felt her cheek. It was cold and clammy.

‘It wasn’t temper at all, Alan. He was in total control of himself. He just enjoyed it.’

I ran my hand gently up her thigh, placed it on her crotch. She put her hand on top of mine and pressed it. She sighed.

‘What did you do?’ I asked very quietly.

‘I stood up. I said, “It’s over. Don’t ever come after me or I’ll get my brother on to you.” I never saw him again. He was a coward.’

That afternoon in the Pincio Gardens, under the parasol of an umbrella pine, I found it hard to believe that a young man could be like that. I am wiser now. I know that this tale, which seemed so extraordinary to me in my academic ignorance, was commonplace and banal. Too commonplace and banal for Ange, my extraordinary Ange.

‘So that’s my family,’ she said. ‘What about yours?’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

‘There has to be.’

‘There isn’t.’

Then she said something very wise – I was constantly taken aback by her wisdom.

‘That in itself is a story,’ she said.

So there in the Pincio Gardens, in the late Roman afternoon, I told her what little there was to tell. I told her that I was an only child, and that my mother and my father were very quiet people who showed no outward manifestation of their love.

‘How do you know they loved each other if they didn’t demonstrate it?’ she asked.

‘Well, they hardly ever argued. They never seemed to disagree about anything. They never seemed upset.’

‘I’m not that thick that I haven’t gathered a thing or two about your philosophy lark from listening to you,’ she said, ‘and it does seem to me that you’ve come to a very positive conclusion, that your parents loved each other, from a whole series of negatives, and that doesn’t seem right to me.’

‘I want to think they loved each other,’ I said.

‘Well that’s me and . . . I nearly said his name . . . all over again, isn’t it?’

We were so different, I thought, and yet we were two of a kind. My hand was still on her crotch and she was still pressing down on it. Time was standing still. I looked at the sun and it wasn’t sinking.

I told her how this week in Rome, watching how tactile people

were, watching all the kissing and handshakes and affectionate touches, I had realised that I had never been touched by my parents, not once, with any real affection or warmth. My mother would kiss me morning and night, a cool, controlled, structured kiss. My father never kissed me at all. When they saw me off to boarding school – I can't remember whether I told you that I went to boarding school, but you have probably deduced it – my father would shake my hand and say, 'Good luck, old prune', and when I came back from boarding school he would shake my hand and say, 'Well done, old prune.' I told her how he locked me in my room for four hours because I'd said I'd mow the lawn, and I hadn't done it. 'No need to have offered, boy, but if you say you're going to do something, you must do it.'

To my amazement, Ange was almost as shocked by my story as I had been by hers.

That evening we wandered slowly through the streets, peered into secret courtyards where there were yet more fountains, found a restaurant that had a buzz about it, and dined in the open air again, in a sweet intimate little square, with the obligatory fountain and obelisk. Our last night. It was very special. As we drank the last few sips of our red wine – she was beginning to appreciate red wine already; I could turn her into a connoisseur – I was very careful not to behave like a university don, not to question her about what our few days had meant to her.

'You know I was talking about birds that first night,' she said.

'Yes.'

I had a fierce desire to be back on that first night, to have it all still before us.

'I think about them a lot. Do you think they're glad to be alive, or do they think, "Bleedin' 'ell, this ain't half a dangerous old world? Sod this for a game of soldiers"?''

I wished that we had it all still to come, the Spanish Steps and the Trevi Fountain, the Forum and the Sistine Chapel, and . . . well, no, perhaps not the Fountain of the Tortoises: I didn't want her to drool over those bronzed young men again.

'I mean, do they have sex education from their mums and dads or are they born knowing how to do it? Do they feel joy? Some people say a skylark sings to announce that this is my patch, so piss off the lot of you.'

Here we were, tired and mellow and closer than ever after our revelations in the Pincio Gardens, and she was twittering on like a bird about birds.

‘I’d like to think it sings from the excitement of life and the brilliance of its talent. I wish I could sing. I sound like a cracked teapot, know what I mean?’

I thought about mornings in our home, and her singing in the bath, and me not minding that she sounded like a cracked teapot. I wondered where we would live.

‘Sleep’s another thing. I mean a bird sleeps when it’s dark, right, and it’s awake when it’s light, right? Except owls where it’s arsi-versi, because our teacher said that owls have special eyes.’

It was hard for me to continue to allow her incorrect use of ‘because’ to pass, to resist saying, ‘Sorry, Ange, but owls don’t hunt at night because your teacher said they have special eyes. They’ve never heard of your teacher.’ I mean, I did listen to what she said, and I found it all very charming, and it strikes me now that some of it was more original than the things I was coming out with, which were the conclusions I had inherited from history.

‘So what about the Land of the Midnight Sun, Alan? What happens there?’

I found it hard, in the warm velvet Roman night, to think about the Land of the Midnight Sun.

‘Sorry, Ange, what about it?’

‘Well, if birds sleep when it’s dark, if it isn’t dark for several months, does it mean that they don’t sleep for several months?’

The trouble with all this was that I had no idea how to answer her.

‘I mean, it’d be the same difference when it’s dark for several months. Do the birds all sleep for several months, or do they piss off to somewhere where it’s light?’

Interesting people were walking past. I wanted to comment. I didn’t dare interrupt her flow.

‘I mean, like, take me. I need my eight hours. Well, I can exist on seven, but I feel half-knackered, know what I mean?’ She lowered her voice. ‘I feel very knackered with you, keeping me awake doing things, you naughty man.’

I felt extremely aroused, but in a way I hadn’t felt before, in a very tired, peaceful way. I had rarely felt so tired. Tonight . . . suddenly I knew what I . . . She was speaking. I wasn’t listening.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t catch that.’

‘I said that I can’t see how a bird can sleep for eighteen hours in winter, because I mean we can’t sleep if we’re not tired, right? So you’d have to say, wouldn’t you, that the evidence suggests that sleep for a bird doesn’t have the same purpose as what it does for us. It’s not cos they’re knackered and need to de-knackerise themselves; they sleep because it’s dark and there’s sod all else to do. And when there’s lots to do, cos it’s light. . . .’

I found myself noting with pleasure her correct use of ‘because’.

‘. . . they don’t sleep, cos they don’t *need* sleep. So sleep for them is just a reaction to whether it’s light or dark, rather than an objective in itself.’

‘The way you’ve put it, it must be so.’

She looked at me quizzically.

‘Are you taking the piss, Alan?’

‘No!’

I had to be so careful.

‘I mean, I know you’re probably not interested in why birds sleep or don’t sleep, because sometimes you’re not very interested in other living things . . .’

Except you. Except you, my darling, with your lovely slender legs and . . .

‘. . . but I hoped there that I was doing what you said was the philosophical process. Like I was arguing out of a priory like you said.’

‘It’s not actually out of a priory, darling. The term is a priori.’

‘Oh.’

I wished that I hadn’t felt obliged to correct her, but on the other hand it might have been patronising not to.

‘Cos I was trying to look at the facts as we know them, and draw a conclusion from them.’

‘You were indeed, and I’m impressed, and I think that your conclusions, because properly led to, must therefore be correct.’

I ran my hand between her legs, under the table. One of the waiters caught me at it and gave me a brilliant smile.

Ange shook her head and she also smiled.

‘The way you’ve changed, Alan,’ she said. ‘It’s fantastic.’

Yes it was. For one thing, I had become a receiver of smiles.

But then Ange’s smile faded.

‘It’s not very nice, though, is it?’ she said.

‘What? What isn’t very nice?’

‘Here I am trying hard to philosophise, and all you can think of is sex.’

We walked slowly back to our hotel, along narrow cobbled lanes that the sun never touched, past high, stern houses with vast old doors. We were drinking each last draught of the city before we bade it farewell.

We entered our room for the last time. It was cosy and welcoming. It wasn’t long before we were in bed.

That night . . . that night we loved each other as if we had no time to lose.

I said, in my clumsy, embarrassed, academic way, as we slipped between the cool sheets, ‘I’d like us to explore more of each other tonight.’

‘You’ve such a funny way of saying things,’ she said, laughing affectionately. ‘You mean *soixante neuf*.’ Her face went solemn. ‘Them’s the only two words of French I know,’ she said. ‘What a condemnation of English education that is.’

I have to admit that it seemed such an unlikely activity that I wasn’t sure, right until we began, whether I would enjoy it. But how I enjoyed it. I felt no inhibition about my enjoyment of Ange’s lovely body. The only embarrassment I felt was with her enjoyment of my body. I could hardly bring myself to believe that my body was capable of giving a girl pleasure, so low had I sunk in my previous self-esteem. Well, Ange did get pleasure, and so did I, and gradually my awkwardness eased. How close we were, how cosy it was, in the cave of our bed, in the darkness of our room, with the night-life of that great city going on all around us, with our sense of being at the centre of so many periods of civilisation. It was the perfect setting for our closeness, our friendliness, our physical ease, our mutual pleasure. Occasional strange thoughts came to me. I wondered if Kant had ever done this, and with whom. I thought of the ruins of Ancient Rome, its empire long gone but still remembered. I wondered if I would be remembered. I thought of Keats’s words, ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ I wondered if, after this, I would feel a need to know anything any more. If not, I could hardly continue to be a philosopher. I thought of myself as if I were Roman history. My crumbling was over. My dark ages were behind me.

This was my renaissance. Would my future be as turbulent as Rome's? Who would be my Mussolini?

Ridiculous thoughts, but I was on a trip, as surely as if I was taking LSD. I took the drug of love that night, drank freely from its cup. Slowly and quickly we enjoyed each other. Fiercely and gently we enjoyed each other. The noises of the city faded away, the yapping dog, the excited conversation of two old men, the wheels of a suitcase clattering on the cobbles, the distant sirens. The whole great city slipped away, proved not to be as eternal as expected, and there were only the two of us left.

TWENTY

I STOOD IN the centre of the Old Town Square in Prague, and opened my guide book, which had pictures of the very buildings that I was facing. There was a magnificent row of town houses, with colourful names, The House At The Stone Bell, at the Golden Unicorn, at the Storks, at the Red Fox, at the Blue Star. I turned to Ange, but of course she wasn't there.

I wasn't ashamed of her, but it would have been quite inappropriate to have brought her with me.

I snapped my guide book shut, and tried to enjoy the square without it, tried to imagine how Ange would react to all this. She wouldn't need a guide book. She wouldn't want to know the exact dates of the various buildings. She would simply drink in their beauty.

These old houses were four or five storeys high, painted in the subtlest of yellows and ochres and pale blues. Each house had its own personality, with its own individual gable. Some were Romanesque and restrained. Others were Gothic and flamboyant.

It wouldn't have been fair to bring her and leave her on her own all day, every day, as I would have been forced to do. Whatever I might think of the conference and its aims, it was work, and I was the sole representative of my great university.

What a square it was, irregular in shape, unplanned, ringed on all sides by ancient buildings, watched over by the graceful Gothic towers and steeples of the Church of Our Lady before Tyn. I wanted to discuss with Ange how much I loved churches and how much I hated religion, but of course she wasn't there.

In her absence, the beauty of the square was distressing. But no, I mustn't be distressed. One day I would bring her here, and we would enjoy all this together. That excited me, and in fact it was impossible for me to feel distressed for long. There was a warm glow in my heart. It was the glow of love.

I wandered over to one of the many cafés which spilled out on to the square. I found a vacant table, and ordered a beer. I was

surprised to hear myself asking for a large one. Why on earth had I done that? Not because I wanted it, that was for sure. I would have quite a struggle to finish it.

I must have ordered it because I knew that Ange would be impressed if she could see me, although, since I knew that she couldn't see me, it seemed like a somewhat fatuous gesture.

The whole of the huge square was free of traffic, and filled with people. I had never been one for watching people. I suppose I hadn't much liked people, and particularly tourists. In Oxford I found them an irritant and often refused to change my course to let them pass by. It was my city, not theirs. Here in Prague, I found myself enjoying the enjoyment of the tourists. Love – and I no longer doubted, after Rome, that I was in love or that, miraculously, Ange was in love with me – had made me a more generous person. Love had made me less judgmental at a stroke.

Many of the tourists were Japanese, of course. They were all taking large numbers of photographs, mostly of their friends and partners smiling. I could imagine them showing these pictures to their relatives in Tokyo and Kyoto. 'This is me smiling in Prague. This is me smiling in Budapest. This is me smiling in Venice.' How they smiled. I wondered what they had to smile about. Only I had a right to smile. Only I was in love with Ange.

Our conference was being held in one of the palaces inside the walls of Prague Castle. From its windows one could look down over the quaint streets of the Mala Styrana or 'Little Quarter' to the great city spread out on the other bank of the Vitava. Here was a scene that I recognised not from life but from paintings, from old paintings of English cities. Here was a fantasy city of sturdy towers and graceful spires such as I had seen on pictorial maps on many an English wall – but here in Prague it was not hanging on a wall as a reminder to town planners of their crimes. Here it was real, and it was lovely, and now I was sitting right in the centre of it, and I so wanted to share it with Ange.

I opened my briefcase and took out a bundle of papers, which I arranged in front of me. I had no intention of working, but I might need to appear to be.

I sipped my beer. It was surprisingly good: stronger than English beer, but well balanced and full of flavour. What a relief. I would finish it without difficulty. I would not need to slink out in shame, leaving a half-full glass.

Even if I had left a half-full glass, I wouldn't have needed to feel shame any more. I was above such petty things. I was no longer a husk.

It did cross my mind that perhaps I only thought that Prague was incredibly beautiful because I was in love, that if I had been sipping a beer in Swindon at that moment I would have thought it beautiful too, but I knew that it was not so.

Occasionally in my long life in philosophy some sad bore has challenged me to disprove the solipsistic view of existence. 'How do you know that anything exists outside yourself?' he has said, and I have resisted the temptation to reply, 'Because if I was inventing the world around me, I wouldn't waste my time inventing anything as sad and boring as you.' I have never believed that one can disprove it, one can only say that it is extremely improbable, and, in any case, even if true, makes no difference whatsoever to one's life. But here, in this crowded pavement café in Prague, I found an argument that was sufficient for me, even though it would not satisfy any logical criteria. I just might have been able to invent Prague, invent this beer (already half-finished, I was surprised to see), but I knew in my heart that I was not imaginative enough to have invented Ange.

A group of delegates from the conference were walking across the square. One of them, silly fool, had left his name tag on. How ridiculous he looked. How glad I was of my forethought in laying out my papers. I buried my head in my notes and scribbled a few words, adopting an intelligent frown, so that, if they did see me, they would think I was working on matters of great complexity and depth.

What I actually wrote was, 'Dear Ange, I love you,' followed by twenty-four Xs, one for each year of her life.

I had no desire to see anyone from the conference that evening, because I was so enjoying being alone. I was having an entirely new experience, that of being on my own and not feeling remotely lonely. I had not realised, until that evening, how lonely I had been all my life.

The philosophers chose another café, to my great relief.

In five days' time I would be with her. We would celebrate her twenty-fifth birthday together, with a meal at a restaurant called the Lemon Tree, in North Oxford. It was full of palms, its walls were a dashing shade of ochre, and its barman made brilliant cocktails

with panache. She would like it. We would drink cocktails. I had never much cared for cocktails. I had always rather disapproved of them as decadent, but it would be a dull man who couldn't change his tastes, and I was no longer a dull man. I had enjoyed my preprandial negroni in Rome, and I would enjoy my cocktails with Ange in Oxford.

I realised with a shock that I had already changed my tastes. I had finished my beer. I felt very proud of myself. I signalled to the waiter, and he hurried over. It was incredible. You don't think so? Then you're lucky. You're the sort of person to whom waiters hurry over. I am a man whom waiters ignore. Or rather I was. No longer!

I meant to say, 'Could I have my bill please?' I have no idea why it came out as 'Another beer, please.'

As I sipped my second beer I thought about our time in Rome. I relived every moment. Memory is the greatest gift that we humans possess. We can relive our happy experiences as often as we like. If we had no memory, there would be so much less pleasure in our lives. I thought of my mother, and wondered if a day would come when she no longer had any memory.

It wouldn't. I would have killed her before that.

In my shock I took a larger sip of beer than I intended, and choked. People looked round when they heard my coughing fit. My waiter hurried over and banged my back. I gasped my thanks.

I wasn't really planning to give my mother a poisoned cake, was I? It had just been a wicked, unbidden thought, even though I now knew how I would do it, if I did it. It would be a mercy killing, of course, but even so . . . I wasn't a killer. I thrust the thought away.

I was in bed with Ange again, in Rome. Oh, the joy of that last night. Oh, the amazing togetherness. We had been as one person in that bed. I must have smiled as I recalled it, and it must have been a strange smile, because the woman at the next table was giving me a curious glance. I could tell that she fancied herself. I turned to Ange, to say, 'That woman fancies herself. It's just as well that somebody does', but of course she wasn't there.

Five days. How slowly they would pass. But I wouldn't mind. I would spend those five days in a most wonderful and secret place, where the sea of anticipation licked the shore of memory. I imagined using that phrase to Lawrence. I imagined his reply, 'You're not well, Alan.' I laughed out loud. People looked round. I grinned at them. They looked away.

I was beginning to behave oddly. It was time to go. It was time to pay the bill. I called the waiter over.

‘Another beer, please.’

Again, my request was a total surprise to me.

‘You like our Czech beer?’

‘It’s scrumptious.’

‘Ah. I do not know this scrumptious.’

‘It means that it’s very nice.’

‘Thank you, sir, but English beer is also very nice. I have been to Nuneaton. I have drunk Ansell’s beer. That is nice.’

I had chatted to a waiter, I who had no small talk. How astonished my friends would have been to hear me. I smiled again. I heard a child say, ‘Look at that man smiling, Mummy’ and I heard his mother’s whispered reply, ‘Take no notice, dear. He’s not quite right.’

I wanted to go over to her and say, ‘Madam, you err. I have never been righter.’ But I didn’t. I didn’t want to be asked to leave the café. I wanted to sit and watch the world go by. I wanted to enjoy all the sensations of that slow Prague dusk, as the soft canopy of night was pulled across the old town as it had been every evening for centuries.

I felt a stab of regret as it occurred to me that I had been wrong in thinking that I could bring Ange to Prague. I would never stand beside her in the Old Town Square. I could never show her places that I had been to before. Her pride would not allow me to. Our life together would be a voyage of discovery for us both, not a lesson for her. That was as it should be. That was exciting. But, oh, I wished that I could show her Prague.

I saw a lady philosopher called Frances walking across the square with a couple of Bulgarian philosophers who had bored me stiff on a subject about which I knew nothing – Bulgarian philosophy. I didn’t want to talk to them, and I didn’t want to meet Frances either just then, attractive though she was. I lowered my head, and began to write.

Dear Ange,

This is the first love letter that I have ever written in my life. I am sitting here in the Old Town Square in Prague, wishing that you were here beside me, remembering Rome and all the wonderful times we had there. Prague is also very beautiful. Thinking about beauty, I

I hesitated. I couldn't think how to continue. I had had no practice at that sort of thing. I looked up, cautiously. There was no sign of Frances, and I was relieved.

Earlier that day, after a particularly tedious session – the conference was on the subject of 'The Role of Philosophy in the Future of the Wider European Economic Community', and so far it had not been quite as stimulating as you might expect from such a title – Frances had come up to me by the coffee urn and said, 'You're different, Alan. You're perky. You're even walking differently. You're bouncing along.'

'Thank goodness I'm not Czech, then,' I had replied. 'Nobody likes Czechs that bounce.'

She had looked at me in astonishment. I could just imagine what she had gone around saying, after that. 'Alan Calcutt made a joke this morning. Not brilliant, but it was a start. He's changed. You don't think . . . I know this is incredible . . . but you don't think he's got a woman, do you?'

Perhaps I flatter myself in imagining that she had even been thinking about me, but in the session that followed coffee – 'The Post-Marxist Role in the New Federalism' – she had craned her lovely neck to look back at me and caught my eye. This was not something that had ever happened to me at any conference before.

I have met Frances at several conferences and have been no more awkward in her presence than I have been in the presence of every other woman I have met. It had never occurred to me until now that she was attractive. Her husbands must have thought her so, I presume, for a while at any rate, but it was a surprise to me, in Prague, to realise that she was almost beautiful, with her slightly fleshy, freckled legs and her red hair, and that for the first time she was considering the possibility that I might be attractive to her. I had no interest in her, of course, but I didn't want to have to rebuff her. I didn't know how to rebuff a woman. I'd had no practice at it. Much better to avoid her. I'd had plenty of practice at that; I was a master.

I began to think about marriage, about my impending marriage to Ange. I hadn't asked her yet, but I was sure that she would accept me. Everyone would say it was unsuitable. Marriage to Frances, on the other hand, would be suitable. My mother, if she had ever been able to even contemplate the possibility of my marrying, would have wanted me to make a good marriage. That didn't mean

making a happy marriage, it meant making a suitable marriage. I couldn't blame her. It was the tradition. The works of Jane Austen were all about arranging suitable marriages. We weren't as different from the Muslims as we thought we were.

Now one or two people I recognised entered the café, and I returned hastily to my notes.

I had only started writing a love letter to Ange because I had to write something, but now, for the first time, I seriously considered the possibility of actually writing her a love letter and posting it. Surely that was what other men did?

I began to read what I had written:

Dear Ange,

This is the first love letter that I have ever written in my life. I am sitting here in the Old Town Square in Prague, wishing that you were here beside me . . .'

'Dear'. How pitifully inadequate. I might as well go on and describe her body as 'nice'.

'Darling'? 'Dearest'? 'Sweetest'?

I looked round the café, wondering how other people began their love letters, and caught the waiter's eye unintentionally. He hurried over.

'Your bill, sir?'

Fuelled as I later realised by more alcohol than I was used to, I saw this as an implication that I had had enough.

'No,' I said firmly, defiantly. 'Another beer, please.'

'Of course, sir. No problem.'

I was all for them learning English, but I did wish that didn't include using odious phrases like 'No problem.'

He returned in an instant, even a trice.

'There you go, sir,' he said.

What sort of tutor teaches them 'There you go'? I felt a rising tide of irritation, and I realised that the waiter was right in his unspoken implications, which made me even more irritated.

I took a sip. This beer really was luscious stuff. I fought my irritation, and I won. I wrote:

Darling, dearest, sweetest Ange,

I am sitting here in the Old Town Square of Prague. It is really very beautiful. On the subject of beauty, I have been thinking, as I sit here . . .'

Damn. I'd already said I was sitting there. I wanted this letter to be good. I must start again. I crumpled the paper up rather viciously in my irritation, and put it in the ash tray. The waiter removed it immediately.

Darling, dearest, sweetest, most gorgeous of all Anges, I am sitting here in the Old Town Square of Prague. It is so beautiful. In such a beautiful place it is natural to think about beauty and I have been amusing myself by making a list of what I think to be the ten most beautiful things in the world.

One. Your smile. It is the sun rising in the morning, and it is the sun setting in the evening, before a night of love. It is the sparkle on the sea.

Two. Your eyes. Your blue eyes are like a summer's day. They sparkle with life. They shine with goodness.

Two 'sparkle's. Damn. Can't start again, though.

Three. Your skin, so delicate, so subtle, so exquisitely pale, so sweetly scented, so clever of it to cover all of you.

Four. Your genitalia. Suddenly I go all coy. I can't bring myself to write less formal words. I look round the café shyly before I even write this much. Absurd? Of course I am absurd. You have given me the courage to be absurd.

Five. Your mind. When I say that your natural intelligence is wonderfully unsullied by knowledge, I might sound patronising. Darling, I don't mean to be. Some people go through life without having a single original thought – I don't have many myself, as it turns out – but I find your thoughts constantly interesting and surprising. In fact, I ought to rewrite this and put this section higher up the list, but I haven't the energy, and I must finish this before I finish my fourth large beer. (Yes, you'd be proud of me tonight. What a pity you aren't here. I shall never go anywhere without you again, my darling.)

Six. Your lips. They are just so perfect.

Seven. Your legs. I almost faint at the thought of kissing them next week.

Eight. Your sweet nose. I love the little curl of your nostrils. The thought of tracing them with my fingers is driving me frantic here in my Prague café.

Nine. Your breasts. What amazing multi-taskers. What joy I get from kissing them, and what pleasure our children will get from drinking your milk.

Ten. Prague.

Being a careful person, I make a habit of never sending any controversial letters until I have slept on them. Having drunk four large glasses of strong Czech beer, I was not so careful. I asked the waiter if he could provide me with an envelope and a stamp. 'No problem,' he said, and on this occasion I didn't mind the phrase. 'There you go,' he said as he brought them, and I didn't even mind that.

Suddenly I was wide awake. The room was spinning round and

round. I was terrified. Was it an earthquake? Was this what earthquakes were like?

The spinning stopped, and was succeeded by a strong feeling of nausea. I needed to get up, and quickly.

The moment I moved, a sharp pain ran through my head. I was having a stroke.

Then I remembered. I had drunk several pints of Czech beer. I had a hangover.

The relief was enormous. There was no earthquake. I wasn't having a stroke. I wouldn't die or be incapacitated.

The relief lasted several seconds. Then the nausea returned. I just made it to the bathroom, and was horribly sick. I could still taste the goulash. This was how thousands of young people felt every weekend. The world was mad.

I drank some water, wiped my face with a cold flannel, and felt wonderful.

Then I remembered the letter. I had written a love letter to Ange. The memory hit me like . . . like a ton of copies of 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein'.

It had been a rather nice letter. I had listed the ten most beautiful things in the world, with the first nine relating to Ange and the tenth being Prague. What a lovely compliment. She would be so . . .

I had called her breasts 'multi-taskers'. Oh my God. My words flooded over me like nausea. 'Your smile is the sparkle on the sea.' Alan, you prat.

No, it wasn't too bad. A bit soppy, perhaps. My dad wouldn't have liked that.

Don't be soppy, boy. Sorry, Father, whom I didn't dare call Dad after I was eight, I've been soppy. But Ange wouldn't . . .

I had referred to her private parts as genitalia. What a phrase to read over your cornflakes. Did they have cornflakes in Gallows Corner?

It was ridiculous, yes, but Ange was used to me being ridiculous. It didn't really . . .

Our children. Dear God, I had mentioned our children. How drunk had I been? What a way to make such a momentous and absurdly premature suggestion.

I was sick again. I held my head over the bowl of the lavatory, and thought of Ange, in Gallows Corner, ripping open the post and reading that. She'd run a mile. I wouldn't blame her.

I drank three glasses of water, leaning against the washbasin, not yet able to stand upright.

Maybe I hadn't posted the letter.

I *had* posted the letter. I could see myself doing it. I had kissed the letter box after the letter had disappeared. I had kissed the letter box? I'd only had four beers, hadn't I? But of course I wasn't used to the stuff.

What bugs would even now be germinating on my tongue? I stuck my tongue out and examined it in the mirror. It was a greeny blue. I didn't think I had ever seen anything so revolting.

I would tell her that I had been drunk when I wrote the letter. My first binge. She'd understand. What laughs we would have about it.

And then a most dreadful thought struck me. I had addressed the letter to Ms A. Clench, believing that she might prefer Ms to Miss, which sounded so old-fashioned and spinsterish. But I didn't know her mother's Christian name. That might begin with A. Her mother might have discarded the title 'Mrs' in the bitterness of her abandonment. She might think it was for her and open it by mistake. She might even open it by mistake deliberately. I'm sure my mother steamed open my letters when I was young. There wouldn't be many letters arriving at the Clench household, and certainly not many from Prague. Her mother would be intrigued. It was only human.

If only I hadn't persuaded Ange to give me her address. 'Why do you want it?' she had asked, which had upset me rather at the time. 'To send you a card from Prague.' 'A card,' she had said. 'I don't know how long it is since I had a card.'

Oh God. Why had the waiter said, 'There you go.' Why had he not said to me, as any waiter with even the faintest sense of responsibility would have done, 'Sir, may I offer you a piece of advice gleaned from my vast experience of tourists drinking Czech beer and beg you not to send this letter until you have slept on it? I will not give you a stamp, and you will thank me.'

I began to feel slightly better. Then I recalled that at eleven o'clock I had to give a lecture. 'Climate and Conceptual Thought – How Much Has the Weather Influenced the Propagation of European Philosophical Ideas?'

I held my head over the bowl again.

TWENTY-ONE

I AWOKE LATE, still feeling full of sleep, and of anxiety too. Was I still in Prague? Did I have another hangover?

I have to admit that the anxiety was fairly normal. Life is brief, and it is a privilege; and to have been born British and too young to have to fight in a world war, and to be old enough to have a chance of avoiding the worst effects of global warming, has been extraordinarily fortunate; I know that when I wake up every morning I should throw back the blankets and sheets and think, 'Hurrah! Another day. Yet again, I haven't died in the night.' But I don't. I crawl into consciousness and think, 'Something's wrong. I can sense it.'

I wasn't in Prague. I raised my body cautiously. I didn't have a hangover. I realised why I felt so anxious. It was Ange's twenty-fifth birthday, and she was coming up to Oxford to celebrate it with me, but – after a difficult lecture which had almost sent *me* to sleep, let alone my audience, and after the usual airport delays – I had arrived home after midnight to find no letter or phone message from her, no indication of her time of arrival, of which train to meet.

There was not necessarily anything sinister in that. She could be very careless about communicating. It was quite possible, perhaps even probable, that she would just turn up, as a surprise, lighting up my drab rooms with her pale blue eyes and her dimple and her smile.

I hadn't slept well. In fact I had still been awake to hear the dawn chorus (a touch of poetic licence; there isn't actually much of a dawn chorus in the college, more a brief solo from one academically inclined blackbird). I had heard people moving about, and had thought that I too would get up, and I had then fallen into an excessively deep sleep.

I realised, as I crawled wearily out of bed, that I had to act on the assumption that Ange would come. After all, I had no firm indication that she wouldn't. And it would be very like her just to

turn up, unannounced, cheerfully saying, 'You didn't think I wasn't coming, did yer?' It might even be a test, a test that I would fail if I doubted her. Even if it wasn't a test it would be fatal to show her that I was worried. She had me in her power.

I ate my breakfast in my dressing gown. I had two slices of toast, as I did every day when I was at home. On the first slice I put butter and honey on one half and butter alone on the other, and on the second slice I put butter and marmalade on one half and butter alone on the other, as I did every day when I was at home. Sometimes I used orange marmalade and sometimes three-fruit marmalade. I wouldn't want you to think I was a creature of habit. On that particular day the marmalade was . . . either orange or three-fruit, I honestly can't remember after all this time.

Then I had a bath, but I couldn't relax. I was ready, at any moment, to leap up and answer the telephone.

The telephone didn't ring.

I hunted for something nice enough to wear, should Ange come. There wasn't anything.

I picked up my mail. Nothing from her. Somehow I hadn't expected there to be. There was only one item, a card from Lawrence and Jane. No mention of the projected sabbatical, but some wonderful news. 'Just a line to hope that Prague went well. Didn't have time to tell you before you left, but, unfortunately, young Mallard made a balls of the Ferdinand Brinsley.'

A dreadful thought struck me. I hadn't bought her a present. I hadn't even got her a birthday card. What a hopeless man I was. How dysfunctional I had become over the years. I hurried out, striding briskly across the quad. It was an unreasonably, tactlessly lovely day. The lawns were still immaculate, despite the dry weather.

I went into a shop, and looked for a card that featured darts. There weren't any, and afterwards I was glad. She was probably swamped by cards with darts on them. I stared at the shelves, and the more I looked the less I saw. I wondered about a humorous one, but I was not of a generation that found it easy to give humorous cards, and they all seemed very vulgar anyway. In the end I chose one with a red rose on it and the words 'For My Darling'. I thought it hopelessly old-fashioned and florid, but it was the best I could do.

I looked at the shops of Oxford and I quailed. I have never been any good at shopping, and I don't think I have ever bought an

interesting present in my life. Oh God. I felt a wave of depression and self-disgust. I walked up and down Cornmarket, a street I had always avoided, a street devoid of any academic atmosphere. I was lost there. I didn't think it was entirely my fault. I found it undistinguished at best, tacky at worst. I thought of Rome's shops, and felt ashamed of my country as well as of myself.

I stared at clothes shops. Lingerie? I wouldn't know where to start. I looked in a jeweller's window and was blinded by the choice. Oh how I longed to be a man who knew what to buy a girl on her twenty-fifth birthday.

I took the easy way out. I decided that it would be fun to stroll round Oxford with her next morning, and choose something together.

I walked back to my rooms, trying not to rush, trying not to hope for a message on my answerphone.

Then a great thought struck me. When Lawrence wrote his card, they couldn't have received my card from Prague. Cards from abroad took ages to arrive. It was very probable that Ange hadn't received my letter yet. In fact it was almost certain that she hadn't. A great wave of relief swept over me. Suddenly I felt altogether more hopeful. She would turn up unannounced. I would be able to warn her that a letter was coming and that I had been drunk when I wrote it.

I had sent cards from Prague to all my friends, feeling somewhat ashamed of my vanity as I had written them. My friends often sent cards from abroad, and I so rarely went abroad. This had been my pathetic chance to impress. 'I'm here for a big philosophy shindig. What a beautiful place.' 'The building on the right is where we're having our pan-European conference.'

It occurred to me now that I could check up on whether my cards – posted earlier in the day on which I had written to Ange, and therefore setting off on their journey from Prague a day earlier than my letter – had arrived.

'Hello, Ashley, just ringing to see how you are. It's such a long time since we talked . . . No holiday, no, but I've just been in Prague, showing the philosophical flag. No doubt you got my card . . . Oh, really?'

The Pettifers in Chipping Camden hadn't got my card either, nor had Gordon Wenlock in Iffley. My spirits rose. I was safe . . . for the time being, at any rate.

I grew more confident. I persuaded myself yet again that Ange was not the sort of woman who would feel that she needed to let me know that she was coming.

Never had an afternoon passed so slowly, never had the Oxford sun shone more gloriously, but I was trapped in my rooms, waiting for a phone call that didn't come. Again I persuaded myself that it was unlikely that she would phone. It would be more in her style to just turn up, smiling. However many times I persuaded myself of this, I had to persuade myself all over again.

I cleaned my teeth for the third time. Ange was a bit of a tease. I persuaded myself that she would delay her arrival until the last moment. It might even be the final part of that test. 'You didn't panic, did yer?'

Our table was booked for eight o'clock. At eight fifteen I rang the Lemon Tree.

'Oh, hello. It's Alan Calcutt here. I have a table booked for eight o'clock . . . Yes, for two. My . . . er . . . companion hasn't turned up and I was just wondering whether perhaps there has been a misunderstanding and she is . . . er . . . waiting for me there . . . Yes, a young lady, dark hair, pale blue eyes, dimple on her chin . . . No young ladies on their own at all, dimpled or undimpled. Thank you.'

At twenty-five minutes past eight I rang the station to ask if there were any difficulties with the trains. After an interminably long time the phone was answered and a man said, 'I'm glad to say the service is running very smoothly tonight.'

'Thank you,' I said, not sharing his gladness.

At twenty to nine I telephoned the restaurant and cancelled my table.

'Thank you for letting us know,' said a female with a very pleasant voice and only the faintest touch of sarcasm.

'No problem,' I said.

Even in my despair I was shocked to hear myself using that phrase.

At five to nine I lifted my hands from my head and stood up. I went to what I laughably call my kitchen, got some tissues, wiped my face and blew my nose.

At two minutes past nine I kicked the table. This was a foolish thing to do as I hurt my foot and the table didn't care. I had a sudden memory of Ange saying how funny it would be if things could think and speak. I thought of the table saying. 'I don't think,

therefore I'm not.' I don't know why, but that broke my resolve, and I cried and cried.

At half past nine . . . these times are estimates, I didn't keep looking at the clock . . . it suddenly occurred to me that Ange could be dead. She could have been killed crossing the road. She could have had a heart attack. Young people sometimes did. She could have had a stroke, and be unable to speak. She could be trapped, unable to contact me, feeling that she was letting me down.

I could always ring her home. In fact I had to ring her home.

I picked up the phone, but after two rings I put it down again hurriedly. This was not the right time. I was in no state to conduct an important conversation.

I opened a bottle of red wine, poured some, rolled it round the glass, sniffed it, and settled down with it as my companion on what might be a long night.

Round about ten o'clock I decided that there was a much simpler explanation. In the end she had found it impossible not to spend her birthday with her family. Her mother had begged her, burst into tears at the thought of the husband who had abandoned her, and she had felt, warm-hearted girl that she was, that she must stay.

But why hadn't she phoned me? That explanation didn't really hold water. It might have been difficult to phone, but she would have done it.

I pulled myself together and decided that I must do something positive. This was a test of my strength. I mustn't be weedy. That was another of my father's favourite adjectives. Mustn't be weedy, boy. Sorry, Father.

I poured the wine back into the bottle. There was no solace to be had from it.

I settled myself at my desk, made a couple of finicky adjustments to the light, and settled down to work on my manuscript. How neglected it looked.

'When Nietzsche said that there are no truths, he must have realised that, if there are no truths, his statement that there are no truths cannot be a truth. The fundamental dilemma at the heart of . . .'

My eyes closed. The tension of the day had caught up with me. I slept for seven hours, with my head lolling on page 528.

TWENTY-TWO

I WENT TO Gallows Corner the next morning, drove there in my little car. If anything is likely to depress the depressed and worry the anxious, it is the North Circular Road. From time to time I felt a strong temptation to pull the Mem Saab into the path of a lorry and end it all there and then. Even now I can hardly believe that I didn't, so strong was the urge, so great my anger, so black my despair. However, I kept telling myself that I must not harm innocent people, that I was not a monster, that it was unfair to hate the rest of the world and kill the innocent driver of a white van – I was particularly tempted by white vans; I have always hated them – because of one woman's heartlessness.

Besides, I had trouble with that word – heartlessness. I could not quite bring myself to see Ange as heartless. I clung to a glimmer of hope, hope that there was some other explanation for her failure to visit me, and for her silence. Was I not being unduly precipitate in deciding that she had jilted me?

I crawled along Eastern Avenue, not a glimmer of anything of beauty the whole way: this was the twentieth century's heritage. I was in the East End of London and I kept my doors locked against drug addicts, psychopaths and terrorists. I saw only ordinary, tired people. At last I reached Gallows Corner – how that name suited my mood – and had no difficulty in finding her street, which was set back close to the accurately named Straight Road.

I was shaking with anxiety and tension. I parked near the end of her road and waited. I was waiting for her to come out of her house and set off across Romford to her work, and I was waiting for the postman. Yes, I had decided to intercept him.

I waited for more than three hours. I became very self-conscious. I felt that I must be extremely noticeable, sitting there, hunched in my Saab. Maybe scared housewives would phone the police.

I was scared too. Our society was collapsing into anarchy and violence. Strangely, I saw no sign of it that morning. Everything seemed very peaceful. People smiled at each other, and nobody

stared nervously at my Saab.

For three hours I kept watch over that road and its small brick houses built in clumps of four. They were dull rather than ugly. This very ordinary road was the road she had walked down time and again. How incongruous her beauty must have looked.

I rehearsed what I would say to the postman.

‘You won’t know me but I’m a friend of a young lady in number 62. I sent her a love letter, addressed to Ms A Clench. You know how it is with love letters. You get carried away and say things you regret. Would it be the most awful impertinence to ask you to do me a terrific favour and tear up any letter with a Prague postmark addressed to Ms A. Clench? I am very happy to offer you a small sum to buy a drink. Would a tenner be acceptable?’

You may think that it wouldn’t be too difficult to say this to a postman, but I became extremely nervous. I felt so out of place in these mean streets: a philosophy don in Gallows Corner. I felt that my words would sound ridiculous, that I would feel humiliated by the exchange, that the postman would look at me with scorn and refuse to perform what was, I knew, an illegal act.

There he was. My heart began to beat very fast. I opened the door but I couldn’t get out. I felt rooted to the seat. You may think that I was inventing an excuse for inaction, but the moment I saw the postman I realised that my desire for Ange not to see the letter had been valid only while we were in a relationship. Now that something had occurred to end or interrupt that relationship, there was no longer any risk in her seeing the letter. It could not make matters worse, and it just might make them better. In fact it had become my only hope. It just might touch her to discover how much I loved her, how much more beautiful than Prague I thought she was. Of course it was quite likely that she had no idea that Prague was beautiful. She might have thought my letter was the equivalent of saying, ‘You’re gorgeous, more gorgeous even than Middlesbrough.’

The postman gave me a suspicious look, and I decided that I had better drive off. I drove up her road, heart still beating furiously. I slowed down outside number 62. It would need painting soon, and the garden looked unloved. It was heartbreakingly ordinary, but not dramatically decrepit.

I had to be brave, I had to find out what had happened. I needed to know – but I didn’t dare, didn’t dare walk up that ordinary path,

knock on that ordinary door. Did I fear that Ange would be there and that she would turn out to be ordinary too, and all my belief in her beauty was the illusion of a sad old man? No! Not that!

The human mind is brilliant at inventing excuses for inactivity, and mine came up with a very good one. I needed to exhaust all possible avenues of information before I actually called on Ange. I needed to do a bit of research first. I could always call on her later.

I parked in a little street where there was a cluster of small shops. There was the Ocean Blue Fish and Chip Shop, the Crescent Pharmacy, the Bread Basket, the Flower House, and Terry's Gents and Ladies Hair Stylists. It was all surprisingly neat and cosy, barely horrific at all. I went into the corner shop, and discovered that the local paper, the *Romford Recorder*, would be out next day. Next day! I couldn't face driving all the way back to Oxford. There was nothing for it but to go to a Travel Lodge. These places are so impersonal that nobody would notice that I hadn't any luggage, and you paid in advance, so in the morning I could just slip out unshaven.

Next morning I was in that newsagent's almost before the elaborate process of unlocking it was finished. The Asian gentleman who sold me the *Romford Recorder* was extremely friendly and spoke with an estuarine accent. The estuary was the Thames and not the Ganges.

I couldn't see a park or an open space or a seat of any kind, so I hurried back to my car, and there I read the paper from cover to cover.

'The text that led to mum's murder'. 'Fears for young in syringe strewn garden'. 'Crowbar too much for car thieves'. 'Ram raiders fail in off licence heist'. 'Maggots dripping from ceiling at flats'. That is just a small selection of the headlines I found in the *Romford Recorder*, headlines which contrasted strangely with the good humour in the quiet streets all around me.

'Sad Accident of Gallows Corner Pedestrian', 'Street mourns "happy-go-lucky" Ange', 'Skip temp in Meteorite Horror', 'Killer Driver Had Drunk Eighteen Vodkas', "'She Was Only A Temp, But We Loved Her" – Skip Boss', 'Tragic Death of "Dart in the Temple" Girl. "She died at the game she loved" – mother'. That is just a small selection of the headlines I didn't find.

There were also no Bedwells or Clenches in the Deaths column.

I thought about going back to her street and summoning up the

courage to call at number 62, but I had another excuse to hand, and it was a good one. I had not been able to shave or clean my teeth at the Travel Lodge, since I had not taken any luggage. I was wearing dirty clothes. The face that stared back at me from the mirror in my car was haggard and exhausted. I couldn't call on Ange looking like that, couldn't let her mother see me looking like that.

I waited for more than an hour, watching that street, but Ange didn't emerge.

I hadn't slept well, and on my drive back to Oxford I had a constant fear of falling asleep. I was having to force my eyelids to stay open. I would wet my hand on my saliva, take off my glasses and rub my eyes. I was a danger to traffic. I stopped three times for little naps. It was such a battle to stay awake and alive that I felt no temptation to drive in front of a lorry. It was only too likely that it would happen.

How drab my rooms were, and how quiet, how desperately quiet. I looked at all my books and thought, 'There is no solace now in any of them.'

I plucked up my courage, picked up the phone, dialled Ange's number, then rang off the moment I heard the tone. I couldn't speak to her in this condition.

I ran a hot bath, washed myself thoroughly, shampooed my hair, shaved, cleaned my teeth, dried my hair, put on clean clothes, looked at myself in the mirror, mouthed, 'You'll do', and rang Ange's number again.

It took me quite a bit of courage to resist the temptation to ring off. The phone rang and rang and rang. Her house sounded so empty. There was no answermachine message. I rang off, exhausted and limp.

I felt utter black despair, a deep childish anger with the world. The phone rang and I grabbed it angrily.

'Yes?' I barked.

'It's me. Where are you?'

Oh God. It was her day.

'That is a very stupid question, Mother. You've rung me at home, and I've answered the phone, so it doesn't take a genius to work out where I am.'

'Well, well, well. We are getting rude to our mother.'

'Mother, I am not plural, as you have pointed out you aren't.'

'I'm just glad your father's not alive to witness your manners. I

just don't know where you get it from. You should be here, Alan. It's your day.'

'I'm sorry, mother. Things have cropped up.'

'Cropped up? What things? Why have things started to crop up all of a sudden? Things never used to crop up.'

'I'm sorry, Mother. I'll come tomorrow.'

'That's all very well, but I was looking forward to my cake.'

That was the moment that tipped the scales. I banged the phone down and thought, 'I *will* kill you.' There I was, in love and jilted by the girl whom I had thought loved me, utterly alone and in despair, and the only relative I had in the world had revealed that it wasn't me that she was missing, it was her sodding cake.

TWENTY-THREE

AS I DROVE to the Home with my cake the next day, I listened to a symphony on Radio Three. I don't listen to Classic FM, they keep telling me to relax, which makes me almost as tense and angry as traffic calming does. That symphony could have been my story. There was a little phrase that kept coming in, almost innocent at first, but steadily getting more and more ominous, just like my thoughts about killing my mother. At first I hadn't taken them seriously, but their insistence had forced me to, and yesterday they had exploded just like that phrase was doing now as the symphony was reaching its climax. Sadly, I don't know what symphony it was or even the composer. I'm not very musical, and I arrived in the car park before it had finished, and I didn't dare be late for my mother. 'Sorry, I'm late, mother, but I was listening to a lovely symphony and I just had to find out who wrote it.' 'I see. Your own mother is less important than a symphony. It's come to that.' Just not on.

'I've brought you a cake, Mother. It's a fruit cake for a change.'

'I hope it's not too heavy.'

Relax. This wasn't *the* cake. This wasn't poisoned. I realised that I would need to do a lot of research before I would be ready to take a poisoned cake.

It wasn't the poison that presented the problem. Well, I didn't think it would. I was going to use a concoction gleaned from the only Inspector Didcot mystery that I had ever managed to finish. The murder had been committed by the coroner (a typically incredible Lawrence touch) who had killed his wife's ecologically sound but morally dubious lover with a poisoned loaf of organic wholemeal bread. The poisons were listed. How the coroner obtained them was revealed in detail. Lawrence prided himself on his authenticity, and, being entirely selfish, had no qualms about his books being used as an instruction manual for murder.

I, on the other hand, wish harm to nobody. Not now, anyway, not this morning as I write this in my little twelve-foot-by-ten space, with no view of the outside world. I will not risk telling you what

the poisons were in my cake, or how I procured them, for fear that among my readers there is one person as mad as I was at that time.

I would not have been able to even contemplate killing my mother if I had thought that there was the slightest risk of her offering a slice of cake to one of the inmates or nurses. I only wished that I would be able to tell her how her meanness had contributed to her death.

No, my problem was with the cake mixture. I had never baked a cake, and if it wasn't up to my mother's high standards she wouldn't eat it, and if she didn't eat it, she wouldn't die. It didn't take a philosopher to work that out.

My mother was particularly depressed that day. She couldn't remember what she'd had for lunch. She was convinced that her memory was beginning to go. She recited several aches and pains, and told me that it wasn't much fun being eighty-seven. She couldn't understand a word the new Polish nurse said, and she didn't like to be seen on the commode in front of a foreigner. I persuaded myself that, had my mother been happy that day, I would have abandoned my plan to murder her. I persuaded myself once more . . . maybe I was too easily persuaded . . . that it would be a mercy killing.

I needn't go into great detail about my attempts to bake a cake nice enough to tempt my mother. I produced cakes that didn't rise and cakes that exploded through their icing like tiny volcanoes. I produced a cake that came out in strata resembling the Jurassic Coast of Dorset and Devon. I produced burnt offerings. I thought of a silly joke to tell Ange. It was said of good gardeners that they had green fingers. It was said of good bakers that they had sponge fingers. I smiled, and then I remembered that there was no Ange to tell, and that, having learnt quite late in life to enjoy silly jokes, I would in all probability never again have anyone to tell them to.

At last, I felt ready to produce *the* cake.

'Some cake?'

'Thank you.'

I was being given tea by Lawrence and Jane. I could hardly bear to sit with them in the cool elegance of the sitting room of Kierkegaard, eating tiny sandwiches, cutting my piece of cake with an antique cake fork, sipping Lady Grey tea from a Royal Doulton

cup.

‘There’s good news, Alan. Very good news,’ said Lawrence. ‘I’ve got you that sabbatical. No problem.’

‘There you go,’ I thought. Even Lawrence is saying ‘No problem’ now. The language is dead. I was surprised his invitation hadn’t said ‘will u come 4 t?’ (Ange had shown me her text messages. Oh, Ange, Ange, Ange, to have you here now, in this room, outraging these sad people.)

A year’s freedom on full pay. It was meaningless now. I tried to look enthusiastic, but I knew that I was using too many adjectives to compensate for the lack of excitement in my eyes.

‘Terrific,’ I said. ‘That’s wonderful. That’s really good news. Oh, how splendid. That is exciting. Thank you, Lawrence.’

They looked at me with synchronised concern.

‘How *are* you?’ asked Jane.

‘Yes, how *are* you,’ echoed Lawrence.

‘I’m fine,’ I said. ‘Lovely cake.’

An imp tried to persuade me to add, ‘I’m trying to bake cakes. I’m having no luck.’

I resisted.

There was a slightly awkward silence.

‘So,’ I said, ‘I gather from your card – thank you for that, incidentally . . .’

‘No problem.’

‘I gather that young Mallard made a bit of a mess of the Ferdinand Brinsley.’

‘He was out of his depth.’

‘Oh dear. I’m sorry.’

‘Yes, it was sad.’

There was another slightly awkward pause.

‘That girl,’ said Lawrence. ‘Ange, was it?’

‘It was.’

‘Are you still seeing her?’

‘Yes. Yes. Yes.’

There was a silence, a horrible silence, a deep silence this time, not a slight silence. In the depth of the silence my stomach gurgled. I was on my third cup of tea.

I heard my father saying, ‘Don’t be soppy, boy. Don’t be weedy. Face the music. Always better when you face the music.’

‘I use the word “Yes” in a rather personal sense, meaning “No”,’ I

said. 'She didn't turn up for her birthday. I think she's jilted me.'

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Jane's eyes and lips both said. 'Well, we did warn you', but she resisted the temptation to say the words, and I was grateful for that.

'I didn't know people used that word any more – "jilted",' said Lawrence at last.

'Lawrence!' said Jane. 'I'm sorry, Alan. Only a man who puts language before emotion could have said that.'

'I don't think Alan is in the mood to hear us washing our dirty linen in public,' said Lawrence.

'Nor to listen to clichés,' I said.

'Quite right, Alan,' said Jane sweetly. 'Well said.'

I knew that Jane was only being nice to me because she wanted to score off Lawrence, but I was grateful none the less. What an attractive face she had on the rare occasions when she wasn't looking superior.

'I hope you don't use clichés in your novels, Lawrence,' I said. 'I ought to read one some time and find out.'

He flushed slightly. Jane smirked slightly. I prided myself slightly – everything was being done in such a restrained manner, as befitted such an elegant tea – on the way I had introduced the lie that I had never read any of Lawrence's books, and could not therefore have got the poisoned cake idea from him. I felt that I was thinking of everything, minimising every risk. I think now that it shows how unhinged I was at that time. The risk was enormous. There could be no other suspect, if my mother died from poisoned cake that I had brought.

'We're sad to see you like this, Alan,' said Jane. 'Very sad . . . but, as you may well come to realise one day, it is probably the best thing for you.'

'No!' I said, with passion.

Jane frowned. My passion clashed with the room.

'No!' I repeated. 'Never. You despise her, but we have been so good for each other. We went to Italy. I taught her about Palladio and she taught me about Fellatio.'

They stared at me, open-mouthed. It was a good moment, but I was too tense to enjoy it.

I had a second slice of cake, and went home, and baked . . . *the* cake.

I telephoned Ange twice that evening, uncertain whether I was

doing it in moments of strength or moments of weakness. Once I rang off before she had a chance to answer. The other time I hung on and on, but there was no answer machine, and no reply. I could hear the phone, ringing out over that drab street near Gallows Corner. I could smell the emptiness of the house.

Why was the house empty? Where had Ange gone? Where had her mother gone?

I was shaking as I slipped the poison into the mixture for my chocolate sponge cake, carefully following Lawrence's instructions in his book.

I was shaking as I slipped the fatal cake into my rusty old oven.

I was shaking as I removed it.

It looked good. It looked appetising. It was her favourite. There was no doubt that she would cut herself a slice.

But was it good inside? Was it too dry or too heavy or too soggy? If so, she might not eat enough.

I had to take it on trust. I couldn't cut it open to see.

I set off, in my ancient Saab, to murder my ancient mother.

TWENTY-FOUR

IT SEEMED TO take for ever, that momentous journey to the Home, the journey that I made every week. I always felt nervous, but I had never before felt this powerful mixture of dread and excitement. It was one of those days when every slow driver in the county has decided to crawl to town, frightened of entering roundabouts, willing the traffic lights to turn red before they got to them. Old men with square heads and caps, tiny women dwarfed by their steering wheels, learner drivers on their second lesson, repair men in white vans who wanted to ensure that they only had time to do three calls in the day, they were all out that afternoon.

I pulled in under the chestnut tree in the vast car park, as the sun had returned and I didn't want the cake to sag in the heat. I couldn't take the cake in with me, because, if I did, I would have to eat a piece. I would have to go out for it when I left, having pretended that I had forgotten it.

I took the carrier bag in with me, in the hope that Mother would assume the cake was in it and not ask questions.

I had an irrational hope that she would have died just before I arrived to kill her, but what were the chances of that? She looked particularly hale that day.

'Hello, dear,' she said, and she said it quite warmly, which disappointed me. I hoped that she'd be in one of her really crabby moods. She'd be easier to kill. Please don't think, incidentally, that I was finding this easy.

We exchanged the usual passionless kiss, two flaccid cheeks connecting for a second.

'Is it warm out?'

'Very.'

'I thought so. All this horrid sun.'

My mother didn't like the heat.

'Were the roads busy?'

'Very.'

'I'm glad I don't drive any more.'

I would never have to endure another conversation like this. Never ever.

But then she said, 'I've been thinking.'

'Oh?'

'You get a lot of time for thinking in here.'

'Well if you'd go downstairs . . .'

'Mrs McAllister just sits in her chair and snores, and Mrs Purkiss eats with her mouth open. You can see all the food. It looks bad enough on the plate. Who wants to see it churning around all wet in an old woman's mouth? And Miss Furlong gives that silly smile of hers all day long. I tried it, Alan, for your sake. I couldn't stand it.'

'I didn't want you to do it for my sake. I wanted you to do it for your sake.'

'Well anyway I couldn't stand it.'

Silence followed.

'Come on then, Mother,' I said. 'What have you been thinking about? You said you'd been thinking.'

'I have.'

'Well, what have you been thinking about?'

It was like drawing teeth.

'Oh, this and that.'

'Oh, come on, Mother, you can't just say you've been thinking and leave it at that. You sounded as if you'd been thinking about something important.'

'I have. I've been thinking about your father.'

This was a surprise. She very rarely mentioned my father these days.

'What about him?'

'He was a good man, your father.'

'Of course he was. But?'

'What do you mean, "but"?'

'You were going to say he was a good man, but . . .'

'I wasn't. I won't hear a word against your father.'

'Of course not.'

'He was a good man. But . . .'

She was choosing her words carefully, and this time I had the sense not to interrupt. ' . . . he didn't understand women.'

I paused, and then said, 'In what way exactly?' very gently. I was aware that by chance my mother had chosen this very afternoon to unburden herself of something.

'He . . . didn't understand that we like to be told things.'

'What things?'

'Certain things.'

'Like?'

'Well, don't take this the wrong way, Alan, your father was a very kind man, but he never, not once ever, told me that he loved me.'

'Of course he loved you.'

'Yes, I know he loved me, but he never said it, and I wanted him to. Once would have been enough. He'd say, "Chin up, old girl" if he knew I wasn't happy, or "Well done, my girl" if I'd made him a nice meal. I mean, we were very happy, but . . . he wasn't what I would call a passionate man. We were very lucky to have you.'

'What?'

'Statistically, I mean.'

'That's a funny way of putting it, Mother.'

'Well, you know what I mean, and we weren't brought up to talk about such things. Besides, maths is part of your philosophy that you teach, isn't it?'

Of all the things a man doesn't want to hear from his mother, tales of her bad sex life must rank highly. Perhaps only tales of her good sex life would be worse.

'Anyway, that wasn't important in those days, or so we were led to believe, but it seems to have been important to the Bloomsbury Set and people like that: all sorts of things were going on that we knew nothing about in our suburbs until we read about them much later in the papers, and I must say I do feel a bit cheated. I think the way we were has a lot to do with the way you are.'

You have no idea of the way I am, Mother, not any more.

'You *have* been thinking.'

'You do when you get old. I haven't got very long to live, Alan. No, don't deny it.'

I wasn't going to.

'You do get to thinking in those circumstances. Your father . . . he never really noticed me, not really. He never noticed my clothes. I bought new hats and he just didn't see them. I had to say, "I've bought a new hat, Archie," and he'd say "Oh yes," and I'd say. "Do you like it?" and he'd say, "It's very nice." I had to drag it out of him, and I knew that he'd say it was very nice even if it wasn't. Then he'd say, "How much did it cost? Not that I'm worried," and I'd say "Forty pounds," when it was sixty but I didn't dare admit it,

and he'd say, "Forty pounds! That seems steep. Not that it matters. We aren't paupers." Just once he was really upset by something I'd been thrilled to buy – a lovely skirt, a bit bold, I suppose – and he said, "You aren't coming out in *that*, are you?"

'I'm sorry, Mother.'

'You don't need to sympathise. I don't need sympathy. We had a good life. It's just . . .'

'It could have been better.'

'I suppose you can say that about anybody's life.'

Then she said something that really did astonish me.

'Come and sit closer.'

I moved my chair up close to hers. She reached out and held my hand.

'Do I smell?' she asked shyly.

'What?'

'My breath. Does it smell?'

'No.'

'You'd tell me if it did?'

'Yes!'

'Margaret's does. It's very kind of her to come, but I dread it and she comes every month. Without fail. She's boring too. I'm very nice to her. I should get remission for good behaviour.'

'Mother!'

'Oh, I'm not complaining. I daresay I'd miss her if she didn't come, though I doubt it somehow. Alan?'

Her tone sent a shiver down my spine. It suggested that real confessions were on the way.

'What is it, Mother?'

'I've been a bad mother.'

'Mother!'

'No. I have. What it is, I needed your father to teach me how to love. It . . . it doesn't come naturally to me. I . . . but Alan, in my way, I . . .'

I waited. When it came it was little more than a whisper.

'I do love you.'

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. I just let the incredible words sink in.

'Do you love me?'

I had dreaded the question. I respected her too much at that moment to just say 'Yes.' It was almost as if I suddenly realised that

I loved my lonely old mum – I longed to call her ‘Mum’ – too much to give her the easy answer that I loved her.

‘You haven’t given me a lot of chance to love you, Mother.’

I was sweating, from emotion as well as from the heat in that stifling room, with its faint smell of the commode.

She squeezed my hand. I squeezed hers.

‘It’s just that . . .’ she began.

‘Just that?’ I prompted.

‘Just that . . . don’t take this the wrong way, Alan, but I can’t help wondering, is it our fault, is it my fault, that you’re the way you are?’

‘What way am I, Mother?’

‘You know.’

‘I know, Mother, but you don’t.’

Then, as naturally as if I was discussing the weather, I told her the story of Ange, more concisely than I’ve told it to you, but just as honestly. I spared myself no ridicule. I didn’t skate over my moments of naïvety. I told her the lot, and she listened, and squeezed my hand with her frail, bony, veiny one, and ran her elderly fingers across the back of mine. Towards the end of my tale the tea arrived, but I carried on and we drank our tea without tasting it, and she didn’t even notice that I hadn’t brought out a cake.

There were all sorts of things that she might have said when I had finished. She took quite a long time before she said anything, and when she did speak what she said was a great surprise to me.

She said, ‘I think I might have liked her.’

My mother and I had travelled a long way in an hour and a half. I stood up, and she stood up, and we just stood there in each other’s arms for . . . oh, maybe three or four minutes. Three or four minutes in which we started to make up for fifty-five years of missed opportunities.

Then we continued to drink our tea, which had grown rather cold, and suddenly she remembered that there ought to have been cake.

‘No cake today?’ she asked.

‘No. No cake today.’

‘You naughty boy. You naughty, naughty boy.’

TWENTY-FIVE

I DON'T KNOW how I managed to drive back to my garage. I was quaking. I couldn't believe what a narrow escape I'd had.

I suppose that sounds rather egotistical. After all, my mother had had an even narrower escape.

I set off back to my rooms, carrying the wretched cake. I mean, I couldn't just leave it in the car. If the garage was broken into, and the car stolen, and the burglar died, his family would sue. That's the kind of society we live in. It wasn't easy to carry the cake, and I wished that I hadn't left the empty bag at my mother's. I had to balance the blessed thing on one hand. If I pressed on it my fingers would sink into it, and might pick up some of the poison.

The cake looked beautiful and very inviting. A man whose face I vaguely recognised said, 'Hello, Alan, that looks good. I suppose a slice is out of the question.' I was embarrassed by the damned thing, but I didn't dare dump it in a refuse bin. Oxford has its share of tramps. I didn't fancy what would have amounted to a blind mercy killing.

I had to pass a baker's shop on my way to the college. The owner was standing at the door, taking a snatch of sunshine at a quiet moment, like an old dog. He looked at the cake and gave a wolf-whistle of admiration. I had never heard a cake get a wolf-whistle before, and it gave me an idea.

'I wonder if I could have a bag for this?' I asked.

'I'd be proud to let people think it was mine,' he said.

I felt better with the cake hidden from view, but not much. I felt faint. My legs felt as if they were made of lead. I had to sit down in the doorway of a dental surgery. A mother hurried her young child past me as fast as possible.

I couldn't believe it. A policeman was approaching. They are never around when you need them, but when they're the last thing you need, up they pop.

'I'm not drunk or drugged, officer. I just felt faint. It's the heat. I'm a philosophy don.'

‘Have you any means of identification, sir?’

I showed him my driving licence, which was all that I had. It did not state that I was a philosophy don, and I wasn’t sure that it satisfied him, because he went on to say, somewhat officiously, ‘May I ask you what are the contents of your bag?’

‘You may.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir?’

‘You asked if you might ask me what the contents of my bag are. You may. You are very welcome to.’

‘Don’t you get funny with me, sunshine,’ he said.

‘I’m being deliberately pedantic,’ I said. ‘If that doesn’t prove that I’m a philosophy don, nothing will.’

I handed him the bag.

‘It’s a chocolate sponge,’ I said. ‘It’s not poisoned.’

He smiled wearily, gave the cake a cursory examination, and handed the bag back to me.

‘Please try to move on,’ he said.

He helped me to my feet. My legs no longer felt like lead. They felt insubstantial, unreal, mirages. I moved them carefully, having no confidence that they would support me, but they did.

‘I’ll be all right now, officer,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

I walked away from him as quickly as I could. I had not enjoyed being so close to him. I was, after all, a man who had intended to poison his mother. I was unfit to live.

I don’t know how I got to my rooms. I felt that I was in one of those anxiety dreams in which one gets no nearer to one’s destination, however fast one walks.

At last I was there. I took the cake out of the bag. I realised that I had no idea how to dispose of it. Even if I took it to the dump, someone might rescue it and eat it. At best, several gulls would die.

I put it on a plate, and sat it on my little kitchen table. It looked so good.

Of course. The obvious way to dispose of it was to eat it. Why hadn’t I thought of that before? I was certain that I had lost Ange. I had nothing left to live for, and I didn’t deserve to live. I had intended to kill my mother, that lovely, unhappy, unfulfilled woman whose whole life had been a disappointment, and whom I had misjudged so monstrously in my egotism.

I cut myself a slice. I was shaking. It looked so delicious. It turned out that I was good at baking after all.

I put the slice of cake on a plate. I took the plate in my hands.

I didn't want to die.

I put the plate down.

I didn't want to die, but I wanted not to live any more.

I picked up the plate.

My mother needed me. She *needed* me! I had to go on living.

I put the plate down again. I decided to put it in the bottom of my rubbish bin, but, before I could do so, the doorbell rang.

My doorbell was ringing.

My doorbell never rang.

I wouldn't answer.

It might be the police. 'A colleague has reported that you had a suspicious cake in a bag. We have reason to believe that it may be poisoned. You have been reported as buying weed killer in garden centres all over Oxfordshire.'

The bell rang again, insistently.

I wouldn't answer.

Ange! It might be Ange! It must be Ange! Nobody else ever called, except my students, and it hadn't been a student's knock. She had realised how much she loved me, how she couldn't live without me. This was my reward for not killing my mother.

'Coming'

I unlocked the door, which was an elaborate process, and even more elaborate than usual on this occasion, because in my excitement I was clumsy.

To expect to see one's beloved and be disappointed, that is cruel – but to expect to see one's beloved and find oneself staring into the bland, greedy, anxious, ambitious face of young Mallard, that was almost too much to bear.

'I wonder if I could come in, Alan?' he asked. 'I need your advice.'

I was flattered. Even at that moment of emotional turmoil I was flattered. Very few people have ever asked me for my advice.

'Come in,' I said.

The social conventions are very strong, and I heard myself offering him a cup of tea.

'That would be lovely,' he exaggerated.

I went into my little kitchen and immediately saw the cake. I was about to pick it up when I realised that he had followed me.

I put the kettle on and ignored the cake. I was irritated that he had followed me into the kitchen and that he was standing so close

to me. I believe this is called crowding someone, though whether one person can become a crowd is extremely dubious. Perhaps 'invading my space' describes it better. I would have felt that young Mallard was invading my space if we were sitting on opposite sides of the Albert Hall, so this was well nigh intolerable.

'You've probably heard that I made a bit of a cock-up of the Ferdinand Brinsley,' he said.

The gas wouldn't light.

'Let me do it,' he said.

The bloody thing lit for him. It would. I had never liked it.

'I did hear that it didn't go down so well,' I said. 'I was really sorry.'

When one hates someone, one has to tell a lot of lies, and each lie makes one hate them more. It really is a vicious circle.

'It was my first big lecture.'

'Well, at least you've broken your duck, Mallard,' I said. It was said for Ange, absent though she was.

'Well, there is that,' he said, missing the humour, if you can call it that, 'but frankly, Alan, I feel that I've lost my way. I'd welcome your advice.'

'Why me?'

'Well, you're experienced. You have a reputation. The world is agog for your book on Germanic philosophy.'

'Agog? Surely not?'

'In some quarters. Everyone says that you have a very fine mind but have not yet produced that definitive work. You've been fourteen years on it, I'm told. It's going to be a great event, Alan. So I wondered if I could . . . this is a frightful imposition . . . ask you to read some of my stuff and help me, put me on the right road.'

'Well . . .'

This was the last thing I wanted. It was one more reason to eat that cake. I recalled a phrase that Lawrence used about him when he wanted to puncture Jane's delicacy.

'A mallard up shit creek without a paddle,' I said. 'That's serious. I don't know. I really don't know. I am rather busy.'

I had finished making the tea. I took the tray into my sitting room. It was a very ordinary college scene, two dons having tea in a book-lined room. Ordinary except for that bloody cake, sitting there on the kitchen table, staring at me even when I wasn't in the room, following me about.

‘Aren’t you going to offer me a slice of that delicious-looking cake I saw in your kitchen?’ asked young Mallard.

He really did look so young, much younger than his thirty years. I realised that he was greedy too. His eyes glinted with lust for cake.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m not.’

He went pink He looked even younger when he was pink.

‘Oh?’ he said. ‘May I ask why not?’

‘Yes, you may.’

I wasn’t just being pedantic. I was wondering rather furiously what I could possibly say.

‘Oh God,’ he said. ‘I forgot you’re known for your pedantry. Why are you not offering me a slice of cake?’

I couldn’t say, ‘Because it’s poisoned.’ I said, ‘Because I’m fifty-five and you’re thirty. Because you’re young. Because you’re greedy. Because you’re a mallard that wanted to fly before he could swim. Because I hate you.’

‘Well!’ he said. ‘Well!’ He had gone bright red. ‘I knew it was a mistake. I knew you were a bastard.’

He walked out of my rooms and tried to slam the door behind him, but the heavy doors on those old staircases don’t slam.

I felt sorry for him at that moment. The moment I had told him that I hated him, I didn’t hate him any more. Hate is like that. But what else could I have done? I couldn’t kill him, a young man with most of his life before him. I couldn’t have sat there and watched him killing himself. Or taken a slice too, so that we died together. Mystery of Sponge Dons’ Deaths. That couldn’t happen.

When he had gone I started to shake. I shoved the cake into the bottom of my rubbish bag, and took the bag out to my dustbin, my very own dustbin marked ‘Calcutt’.

Such was my state that, the moment I had removed the cake, I wanted to eat it. Such was my confusion that I didn’t go for it, because I felt that it might be unsafe to eat having been in the bin. When I realised this I felt quite disgusted with myself for my lack of mental clarity. How could I ever have had any pretence to writing a great book on philosophy?

I knew what I had to do. I had to rid myself of an intolerable burden – my pretension, my delusion, my career, my book.

You will be amazed that I had only one copy, but I had written it in longhand. My study on that stone staircase in that stone building was as fire-proof as any room could ever be, nobody steals from the

studies of dons, nobody would want to steal my book even if they did, and I would have all the time in the world to have a copy made when I had finished it.

For several years now I have possessed a shredder, which cuts documents in two different directions so that it's impossible for them to be pieced together. I use it for things I intend to throw away – financial documents, bank statements, early drafts of articles for magazines.

I fetched 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein' from my desk and I began to shred it. I cried a bit as I did it, but once or twice I laughed, with a laugh that was probably not entirely sane. It was exhilarating, though, even on that desperate night, to get rid of all this unoriginal, tedious nonsense on which I had wasted the last fourteen years of what I exaggeratedly refer to as my life. Germanic. I'd had to put that, instead of German, because bloody Wittgenstein had gone and been born Austrian, ruining my title, the inconsiderate bastard.

It took a long time, because I kept having to empty the shredder. The pile of tiny pieces of paper grew larger and larger all around me. Eventually it got ridiculous and I went to a cupboard where I keep a large roll of black bags – I am a cautious man. I stock everything in bulk. I have three huge bottles of washing up liquid – and I started to shove the shredded remains of my life's work into the bags.

I went to bed just after five thirty, feeling desperate, yet also liberated. I felt angrily light-headed, anxiously relieved and utterly exhausted.

I woke suddenly to the realisation that I had almost killed my mother, which, curiously, seemed much more wicked now that I hadn't done it. It was a glorious morning of high summer, utterly incongruous. As I walked to fetch the Mem Saab, Oxford was full of the delicious scent of new-mown grass. I drove along the Abingdon Road to the rubbish dump, or the Recycling Centre, as it is called in these enlightened days.

The skips were huddled in the centre of the dump like carts in a Western shoot-out. I drove around the outside of the group, noting the signs on them. Rubble. Fridges and Freezers. Bikes. Soft Plastics. Textiles. Newspapers and Magazines. Landfill. Green Waste. Bric-a-brac. Cardboard. Glass.

I found myself back at the starting point and started a second circuit.

I knew that my book was rubbish, but I didn't know what kind of rubbish it was.

I parked under some scruffy trees, which were whispering gently in the wind as if discussing my predicament, and entered a dirty Portakabin. An immense man in an oily vest sat at a desk.

'Excuse me,' I said.

'Yes?' he said without looking up.

'Erm . . .' I began, feeling very foolish. 'I'm throwing away a lot of shredded paper, but it's wrapped in black bags and I'm not quite sure where I should put it.'

'Landfill,' he said, and again he didn't look up.

Landfill! I ask you. Nobody could say that I'm conceited about my work, but . . . landfill. Fourteen years of work.

I had passed the Landfill skip, which added to my anger. Back in my car, I roared off on my third lap, Schumacher at last. I screamed to a halt, and suddenly my anger left me.

I began to pitch my black bags into the Landfill skip. The second one caught on something sharp as it fell, and it burst. At that very moment a brief, sharp gust of wind blew up, as it sometimes does on days which may be thundery later. The gust caught the shredded contents of the black bag as they spilled out, and sent them spiralling up into a hazy sky whose blue was as pale as Ange's eyes, and then the wind died as suddenly as it had risen, and a snow shower of thoughts drifted down on to Landfill, and Green Waste, and Soft Plastics.

An officious young man in a luminous yellow jacket approached at speed.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'You've got rubbish falling all over my tip.'

'That isn't rubbish,' I said with all the angry dignity I could muster. 'That is the masterpiece of my working life.'

'Then why are you throwing it away?' he asked.

That was, perhaps, the lowest point of my life. A 55-year-old man who has earned his living out of philosophy for thirty-three years is asked a question by a man in a luminous jacket in a rubbish dump, and he can't answer it.

TWENTY-SIX

WHEN I GOT home after my humiliation as Stig of the Recycling Centre I knew that I was in crisis. Only yesterday I had attempted to kill my mother, and today I had destroyed my life's work. I had lost my lover, my career, and my self-respect. Every time I thought of what might have happened if my mother hadn't opened her heart to me, I trembled.

I was a philosopher. I knew how to think. I must be able to help myself through this.

I hadn't killed my mother, and I never would kill her, therefore there was no reason to worry about that. I had been unable to contemplate killing young Mallard, who would never realise that I had saved his life. I was not a killer. I was not a monster. I need worry about these things no longer. I might even be able to regain my self-respect.

But I had lost Ange. Whatever the explanation of what had happened, I felt certain of this.

If Ange was callous and wicked, I would be justified in feeling bitter towards her, but I would not need to be sorry that she had gone. If I continued to be truly sorry, then she couldn't be callous and wicked, and therefore it would be inappropriate to feel bitter.

I had to rid myself of my bitterness. It was destroying me, and nobody else.

I couldn't believe my mother's words. 'I think I might have liked her.'

What did I have to rebuke Ange for? She had broken no promises, since she had made no promises. We had been happy together. She had given me experiences that I had never dreamt of. I must eliminate anger from my reactions. There was nothing to be angry about. Anger was a primitive response, and if I was still making primitive responses then I had wasted my whole life as a philosopher.

My life with Ange had led me to question my vocation as a philosopher. I had always taken for granted that philosophy was . . .

well, if not useful, at least important. If I was asked what was the use of philosophy I would talk about the different meanings of the word 'use' and the word 'value'. Is the song of the skylark useful? No. Is it valuable? Most assuredly so.

I think, therefore I am. I think deeply and subtly, therefore I am even more than somebody who doesn't. At the very least, the processes of philosophy lead to clearer thinking. I had never needed to think more clearly than now. My feelings about Ange and my belief in philosophy could not be separated.

I had been through a crisis and I had come out the other side. The whole timbre of this day was calm. Sad, deeply sad, but calm. Yesterday belonged to a different world, a world of fear and farce and poisoned cake. Today, I was a sad man who had lost the only person he had ever loved.

Except my mother. Yes, I realised now that I loved her too, maybe I always had, maybe if I hadn't I wouldn't have cared enough to want to murder her.

I couldn't blame Ange for my emotional turmoil. I had to blame myself for living through so many barren times that I was utterly incapable of dealing with that turmoil.

I could not fully come to terms with my loss unless I knew the reasons for it, unless I knew what had really happened. I believe that the fashionable word for this is 'closure'. I needed closure.

There was nothing for it. I had to go back to Gallows Corner. I had to walk up that drive, knock on that door. I had to find the strength.

I didn't want to go. I wanted to see my mother, sit beside her, chat, reminisce. There had been so little to say, and now there was so much.

But it was more important to go to Gallows Corner.

I made an important discovery on my way there. I was no longer tempted to drive into the path of a lorry or a white van. I no longer hated white vans. They were unimportant to me. White vans, I could take them or leave them.

I parked at the end of her road. I was very nervous. I was perhaps as nervous as I had ever been in my life, and you will know that I had often been very nervous indeed.

I walked along the road, past numbers two, four, six, eight, ten (very unkempt garden), twelve (very tidy, how sad for tidy Mr and

Mrs Tidy-Twelve to live beside number ten). On the wall separating number sixteen from number eighteen there was a syringe. How sheltered my life was. Not that people didn't use syringes in Oxford, but they disposed of them more carefully.

Soon I was in the twenties. God, number twenty-four needed painting.

Number twenty-eight's garden was concreted and held two cars, one dented. Number thirty had a garden full of broken toys. A woman was sunbathing among the rubble at number thirty-four, and number thirty-six's apology for a lawn was covered in stock for a bric-a-brac stall. Number forty-four had neat rows of salvias and crazy paving. Houses were going up in the world, down in the world and sideways in the world. Every garden was a history. Every garden was a statement. Every garden spoke of hope or despair or both. I couldn't help comparing it with Oxford, where the walls all held impenetrable secrets.

By the time I got to the fifties I had to pause. My heart was throbbing. I could hardly breathe. This was a great test of my fitness.

Fifty-two. Fifty-four. I walked very slowly. Fifty-six. Fifty-eight. Oh God. Sixty. Sixty-two. Looks empty. Looks dead. Can't do it. Sixty-four. Sixty-six. Don't be such a wimp, Alan. Don't be so weedy, boy. Face the music. You told yourself you would go to the house, so you must. If you say you'll do a thing, you must do it, and that applies even to things you promise only to yourself, boy. Sixty-four. Sixty-two.

I opened the gate, walked through it, closed it, walked up the path, through the middle of a dead, dull lawn. There were a few flowers, but none of them were out. I remembered a friend's joke. 'You must come when the tulips are out. They're frightful bores.' Ange would like that. Oh, Ange, my darling. I paused, breathed deeply, rang the bell. It jingled fatuously.

Nothing. Nobody. What a relief. What a disappointment. Oh, Alan, will you ever be free from contradictory emotions?

I rang again. And a third time.

Nothing. Nobody. What a disappointment. What a relief. No, Alan, very probably you will never be free from contradictory emotions.

I peered in through the letter box. A tiny hall, shabby, silent, utterly without ornament.

I peered in through the front windows. A long room, a shiny suite, a shabby carpet, a huge TV, just one lurid picture. Oh so commonplace. Oh so unlike Ange, or was it just unlike my memory of Ange?

I went up the drive of number sixty-four. The small garden was reasonably well tended but the lawn needed cutting. They were probably away.

They were away.

I called also at number sixty. The tiny garden was a riot of regimentation, row upon row of small flowers in all the colours of the rainbow, tragic in its careful ugliness.

I rang the bell. The door opened instantly – I had been watched – but it only opened three inches. It was on a chain.

‘Good afternoon, madam. I’m looking for the people next door.’

‘I don’t have nothing to do with them. They’re trash.’

‘Oh. Well . . .’

‘I say “trash”. Only them boys, really. I suppose the women aren’t too bad.’

You are speaking of the woman I love, madam. ‘Aren’t too bad’? Dear God.

‘Them boys, they were the original neighbours from hell. Ought to be on the telly, they ought. You’ve seen my garden.’

‘Yes. Yes. Lovely.’

‘Thank you. I’ve had to do it all since he passed on.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you. Been better since the other boy went. Sent to prison he was, and then he scarpered, never seen again. Good riddance, say I. Bad lot, he was. Romford, cos this is all part of Romford really when it boils down to it, isn’t what it used to be. But then what is?’

‘Too true. So . . . er . . . you wouldn’t know where they are, then?’

‘Away. That’s my guess. I’ve not heard any noise for . . . oh, days. Several days. Though how they can afford to go away beats me. I can’t.’

Was that sad little conversation the nearest that I would come to closure? I hoped not. Oh God, how I hoped not.

I knew that I wouldn’t see Ange, but I didn’t want to leave the area. I didn’t want to go back to Oxford. I drove around aimlessly, saw a pub, parked in the car park because there was plenty of room, went in. Why? Because I was thirsty? Too simple. Because this was Ange’s world? Too far-fetched. Because I wanted to think? I didn’t

need to go to a pub for that. Because it was just possible that Ange had been in there, placed her lovely bottom on one of the seats, maybe the very one I chose? Possibly. Possibly a bit of all these reasons.

I ordered a pint of Fosters. Shame prevented me having a half. The pub was long and narrow, and had a gents' toilet at each end, so it was ideal for me. I tried to think about love. What is love? One can say, 'I love chocolate', but we aren't talking about that. One can say one loves one's mother – how wonderful it was that I did at last – but we aren't talking about that either. We are talking about the love in songs, the love in romance, the love that makes the world go round. (In more primitive times, did people talk of the love that made the world go square, and the love that made the earth go flat?)

It was no use. I couldn't concentrate. The customers, all men, all in dirty jeans, were watching lunchtime television. It was something about antiques. Behind them as they watched was a picture of the Queen, smiling regally but radiantly – quite an achievement. The men's language was riddled with the f word. 'Fucking hundred and ten fucking pounds for that. No fucker wants fucking brass any more.' And still the Queen smiled radiantly, obliviously. I wanted to smile. I saw the funny side, and I realised that, had I ever gone in there in the days before Ange – impossible – I never would have seen the funny side. I owed her so much. How could I resent her?

I drove back to Gallows Corner via her street, hoping against hope that I might catch a sight of her, but of course I didn't.

When I got home I looked 'love' up in my dictionaries. I have two; I'm a belt and braces man. *Chambers Dictionary's* definition of love begins: a) to feel great affection for (especially a close relative, friend, etc.); b) to feel great affection and sexual attraction for (especially a sexual partner, a person one is romantically involved with, etc.). The *Times English Dictionary* gives several categories of definition, but doesn't ever link the words 'affection' and 'sexual attraction'.

If dictionaries don't agree, it is going to be a hard task to define love. I believe that if one does not link 'affection' with 'sexual attraction' one has lust, or desire, but not love. Of course, one can make a word mean what one chooses, and say 'coconut' instead of 'love', but one pays the penalty of seeming ridiculous and of not being understood. I believe that if a society that considers itself

civilised does not include the word 'affection' in its definition of love for a sexual partner, then it is too selfish to survive. All love songs would be based on a hypocritical premise.

I also believe that if love turns to hate because the object of one's love behaves in a way that is unwelcome to one, then 'love' is not an absolute, and is dependent on being convenient to one, and that is no sort of love at all, certainly not a love worth singing about. 'I promise to love, honour and obey.' Who could get romantic pleasure from being honoured and obeyed? The romance is in the word 'love', and if that has no connotations of affection then every marriage is a farce.

It must follow therefore that if I am in love with Ange I feel affection for her. Affection. For *Chambers* this is 'showing love or fondness'. For the *Times* it's 'a feeling of fondness or tenderness for a person or thing; attachment'. The *Times*, more cynical than *Chambers* about love, becomes more sentimental about affection.

It's clear that the meaning of words is not always precise enough to be definitively described even by dictionaries. I like the *Times*'s 'feeling of fondness or tenderness', although I would change it to 'feeling of fondness and/or tenderness'. I felt great tenderness for Ange. If I no longer feel it now, and did feel it then, what is the explanation? She has left me. Therefore I only felt tenderness because she hadn't left me. Some tenderness, that. Conditional tenderness.

These were the thoughts that I carried around with me as I visited my mother. I went at least twice a week now, and listened to her talking about her life, about her friendships and early loves, about the people who had died and the people with whom she had lost touch, all kept alive by the blessed gift of memory, which was failing but only slowly.

These were the thoughts that I carried around with me as I tried to assuage my grief by attempting to contact other women who had meant something (but not much!) in my life.

These thoughts were with me on the train to Dorking, where Rachel had been living when I had last been in touch. As I walked up the garden path at the last address I had, I reflected that in my life garden paths were rather like London buses. You waited ages for one, and then lots of them came along at once. In more serious vein, I wondered why I was there, since I hadn't felt sufficient

sexual attraction for her when she was in her prime. She hadn't been remotely sexy then and would be even less so in her fifties. It was a shock to be told that she had moved away when she got married, that she had been very much in love, and when last heard of she'd had six children. Rachel? Were we talking about the same Rachel, whose knickers had been as impenetrable as *Finnegans Wake*? As I sat in a pub in Dorking, with my half of bitter – I didn't mind seeming a wimp in Surrey – I realised that Rachel's sexlessness had been her answer to my sexlessness, my cluelessness, my Angleness. I mustn't rebuke myself for that. I must rejoice that it was no longer so. And who had achieved that transformation? Ange.

The same thoughts were with me as I sat beside the River Reuss in Lucerne. Yes, in the insanity of my grief I again went all the way to Lucerne to visit the two cafés where I had been with the Swiss lacrosse international all those years ago. This was my second fatuous visit. I hadn't even learnt the lesson of the first. The cafés were still there. I clung to the thought that she had been reluctant to get married, so maybe the marriage wouldn't have worked, but she had seemed a lovely person, so she would have tried to make it work, but would have at last become reconciled to its failure, and would return to Lucerne on the off-chance that the callow, inexperienced but rather sweet English boy she had met and drunk with in those two cafés would have returned on the off-chance that she would be there. This was a series of chances and off-chances worthy of two Ferdinand Brinsley Memorial Lectures.

That is how crazy love can make one. I don't really need to add that I didn't see her and wasn't even sure that I would have recognised her if I had seen her. I even saw one or two women who just possibly might have been her. I even stood up to approach one of them, but she turned away up a flight of steps and I lost her. What on earth would I have said? 'Did you play lacrosse thirty years ago, and were you pretty then?'

I did think of going to the Swiss Lacrosse Federation and trying to hunt her out through that route, but it would have been just too embarrassing, and in deciding not to do that, I achieved a minor victory for commonsense. That too helped me to build my frail belief that there might be life after Ange.

I forced myself to end this insane search, which could not have been more pointless, since I loved only Ange. I spent a day pretending to be an ordinary tourist. I went to a glacier museum,

where they showed us a pictorial version of the climate changes of the last millions of years. Ice ages and periods of searing heat had come and gone, and would again one day, and pictures of how the glaciers were retreating suggested that it might not be too far in the future that our civilisation would be destroyed. I found this deeply sad. I would have used the word 'unthinkable' except that clearly I had thought it. I also found it strangely consoling. If our civilisation was going to end, what had it mattered that Ange and I and our backgrounds and educations and interests had been so different? In the history of the universe a darts groupie was a tiny ant, but so was a doctor of philosophy. I found a peace in my relationship with Ange in retrospect, and left the beautiful city of Lucerne in a much calmer frame of mind.

Those very same thoughts also accompanied me on a more realistic romantic search. I telephoned Frances and she sounded really pleased to see me. I invited her for dinner and she sounded thrilled. I took a train to Cambridge – you have to go via London now – and realised that she truly was a very attractive woman. Being forty-five suited her. She kissed me warmly and said, 'You've come at a very happy time. I've got something to celebrate. I'm engaged. You wouldn't mind if my fiancé came out with us, would you?'

That was difficult, but, following the train of my thoughts, I decided that the reason for the difficulty was that I didn't love her, and therefore there was at this stage (and there would never now be another stage, unless she tired of this husband too) not enough affection for me to want her to be happy, and so I resented the thought that she was so happy on this night when I had wanted to make her happy.

As the evening wore on, however, I realised that I didn't fancy her at all, not truly, not deeply, she would have been a trophy at best. I wasn't really on a woman hunt, I didn't want any other woman, I was just avoiding inaction, and my rooms, and Oxford.

As we ate, I wondered where Ange was and I said to myself, 'I hope she's happy. I really hope she's happy. My love isn't much of a love if it no longer wants her to be happy.'

I didn't know whether I believed it, of course, but I decided that night to keep on saying it, in the hope that, if I said it enough, I would begin to believe it. That seemed ridiculous, but it did work a bit, even then, even that night, when Frances and her future third

husband made me feel so out of it as they said, 'How wonderful that you've been here to share our joy. Good old Alan.'

Good old Alan. I smile wryly as I write this. I'll have to stop in a minute. It's lunchtime. There are one or two ladies with whom I quite fancy having lunch. Romantic prospects? We'll see. Perhaps it is not yet time. It is, after all, less than a year since Ange left me – but that was the past, and this is the future, and the nature of that past has changed my future so much that at least I can have prospects. There are a lot of things that are worse than prospects. The prospects becoming real, sometimes.

Not that I am seeking anything as dramatic as a new love, for a new love would inevitably weaken the old love to which I cling. But at least it is good that I now know how to talk to women, have lunch with them, kiss them goodnight, even, occasionally, make them smile.

Perhaps I should explain that I am writing this on a cruise ship, on a world cruise. I thought I might as well . . . I was going to say 'push the boat out', but they left that to the captain . . . have a bit of a fling in my Sabbatical year. It was what Lawrence suggested, after all, and I think I am still not sufficiently pro-active as a person. I still do what other people suggest.

I'll be glad to leave my cabin. I get a bit claustrophobic soon after twelve. I get a bit thirsty too. I might walk up to the Crow's Nest and have a cocktail.

There's a story told on cruise ships, about an elderly woman on her own, and she sees a man on his own, and she approaches him and says, 'I haven't seen you on this ship before,' and he says, 'No, it's my first time,' and she says, 'Have you cruised before?' and he says, 'No. It's not been possible for the last eighteen years,' and she says, 'That's intriguing. Why not?' and he says, 'Well, to be honest, I've been in prison,' and she says, 'Good lord. That *is* intriguing. What were you in prison for?' and he says, 'Well, murder, actually,' and she says, 'Good lord. Murder. What happened?' and he says, 'I murdered my wife, if you must know. I cut up her body into small pieces and buried it under the patio', and she smiles and says, 'You're not married, then?'

I tell that story partly to show that, after Ange, I can tell stories now, and partly because it's my way of saying that by the standards of cruise ships I am a most eligible man, and I do have my hopes. There's a Danish woman I rather like, or there's the retired

chiropractist – she could be useful – and I fancy that the lady who runs one of the on-board shops held my eye the other evening.

We'll see.

'Unfortunately, I have an inside cabin. It's a bit like a prison cell. Have you seen any of the inside cabins? Would you like to?'

Yes, I know, but come on, I'm an Oxford philosophy don who was a virgin till he was fifty-five. What do you expect – expert chat up lines?

TWENTY-SEVEN

CLOSURE. WHEN I realised where I would find it, I was amazed that I had been too stupid to think of it before. Unfortunately, closure of my romance with Ange brings with it the closure of this book, and that I do not welcome, because the next book I have to write, when I get home, will not be so easy. It will be entitled . . . perhaps you've guessed it . . . 'Germanic Thought from Kant to Wittgenstein'. Yes, I have decided that I have no alternative but to start that vast project over again. I am a philosopher, and that is my subject of expertise, and I either write that or I write nothing, and leave no legacy, and remain the philosopher who failed to fulfil his promise. I'm more proud than perhaps you realised, certainly more proud than I realised, more proud than I was before I met Ange, and I am going to have a go at recreating that vast project. Not that I regret the destruction of the original. I believe that I am a better man now. I believe that I will bring more humanity, more passion, more courage to it. It will be better. It must be better. Those are easy words to write, I know. The fulfilment will not be that easy. I will need all the help I can get.

So, here I am, spending my last morning cooped up in my inside cabin. I tried to pretend to you that it was a prison cell. Rather naughty of me, that, but I find that I have become a bit of a tease. That's one of the many ways in which Ange has changed me.

Perhaps you'd like to know how I got on yesterday. Well, I had a drink with the chiropodist, but I fear I may have put my foot in it. I am still inexperienced in the ways of romance. And I talked to the lady who runs the on-board shop. I asked her – and I'll be the first to admit that it was hardly subtle – I asked her, 'Do you miss your partner when you're on the ship?' There were all sorts of replies that she could have made. 'No, he's on board,' or 'Terribly. We've only been married four years,' or even, 'Yes, I do, but she e-mails me every day.' What I hoped for was 'I don't have a partner at the moment.' It wasn't as good as that, but it was quite promising. She said, 'That arsehole? You must be joking.' I have to say that I found

her conversational style more . . . how shall I put it? . . . more basic than I like. My interest withered in the cold breeze of her language.

I didn't happen to see the Danish lady yesterday, but I will certainly talk to her if I meet her today. I think she likes me, but I am taking nothing for granted. I find that I do hope for your good opinion, and I don't wish you to think that the confidence my affair with Ange has given me will ever spill over into conceit or complacency.

Oh yes. There's one more thing that I must tell you before I describe my final, and successful, search for my beloved. It occurred to me over breakfast (two rounds of toast, honey first on even dates, marmalade first on odd ones, I wouldn't want you to think I am utterly transformed). My mother. She has died. I wouldn't have been able to go away for ten weeks otherwise. Yes, she went downhill very, very suddenly.

She said to me one day, as I was leaving, 'I'm so glad I found you at last, Alan dear.' I kissed her, hurried out, and burst into tears in the corridor. Next morning, one of the nurses rang me and said, 'Mr Calcutt, I think you ought to come straightaway.' My mother wasn't conscious. She was breathing slowly, more and more slowly I held her hand. I actually like to feel that I felt one faint squeeze, but I can't be sure of that. Twice I thought she had gone, only to hear one more breath, but then there were none. 'I think she's gone,' I said. The nurse felt her pulse. 'She has,' she said. 'She's gone.' She put her arm on my shoulder, and said, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' That was so English, and so kind.

My head tells me that I am glad that she is dead, that she has been spared any further indignities of old age, but my heart gives a different message. My heart tells me that it is such a shame, after we had been so cold and distant for so many long years, that we could only be close to each other for a very few months, and I realise that I *will* always feel conflicting emotions, because if one is open to emotion and truthful about emotions there is no other possibility in this difficult old world of ours.

And that thought leads me towards that final meeting with Ange, that closure that I needed.

It was very simple in the end. I didn't need to go back to Gallows Corner. I didn't need to phone and have an embarrassing conversation with her mother. It suddenly occurred to me where I would find her, and it was so simple and so obvious that I was

amazed that I hadn't thought of it before. I would find her at the darts.

I knew in my heart that she wasn't dead or crippled, that she had left me as suddenly as she had joined me. I knew that I would be able to see her at the next World Championship, for which she had booked two seats as usual. Once I knew that, I was much happier. I knew that I would get my closure.

As it happened, I didn't need to wait that long. I bought a darts magazine – looking round in fear that somebody I knew in Oxford would witness the purchase; I had not managed to throw off every vestige of embarrassment – and in it I found a list of fixtures. The very next one was a British qualification event in the leisure centre at a place called Fracton-on-Sea.

I went by train. It was too far to drive. The weather was calm but grey, with a few spits of rain on the breeze. The town consisted mainly of Edwardian and Victorian villas, most of which were now small hotels and B&Bs, though how they could possibly fill them all, in view of the paucity of attractions, I couldn't tell. In the centre of the town there was a sad little shopping centre, three sad pubs, two sad fast food restaurants, and one brave slow food restaurant called 'Donald's'. If I had been a religious man, I would have prayed for Donald.

In front of the shopping centre, the cliffs gave way to a large flat space, much of which was a huge car park. There were also a few garish modern buildings in glass and concrete. The concrete had not weathered well. There was a bingo hall, an amusement arcade, a variety theatre, and the leisure centre. My heart began to beat very fast. This wasn't going to be easy.

I booked into a little B&B called Sandringham. It was flanked by two other B&Bs called Balmoral and Windsor House. My room was very twee and slightly damp. The toilet roll holder was mauve.

I washed, shaved, cleaned my teeth, changed my clothes. I was taking no chances. I felt very sure that I would see Ange that day. It was almost as if I had a premonition.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I even spoke to myself. I suspected what I was going to find, and I knew that it wouldn't be easy. I needed to give myself every chance. I needed to be utterly prepared.

If you love her, Alan, you want her to be happy, or it is no kind of love at all.

If you love her, Alan, you want her to be happy, or it is no kind of love at all.

If the landlady had heard me, she might have asked me to leave.

I walked across the car park, slowly. I was nervous, very nervous. Of course I was.

If you love her, Alan, you want her to be happy, or it is no kind of love at all.

The sea looked oily and uninviting. So did the doorman at the darts event. He told me that there were no spare tickets. I had to charm him to get in, and yes, I did it. I could not have done that before Ange.

I saw them straightaway, almost as if I had known exactly where they would be sitting. He was everything I had expected, and more so. Young, good-looking, kempt.

The jealousy rose in my gullet, yes, it did, I had known it wouldn't be easy, but . . . but . . . I acknowledged to myself that they looked good together, they looked right together. The jealousy was instinctive, animal, natural. Experience and history were against me, yet . . . yet I almost found myself smiling as I looked at them. If you love her, Alan . . . oh, and I did, I knew then more than ever that I did . . . you want her to be . . .

She turned, as if suddenly aware of my presence, and saw me. An instinctive smile lit up her face, until she realised how embarrassing this was for her. The smile died. She looked wretched, and I felt for her, yes, I did, I truly wanted her not to feel wretched.

I made my way between the packed tables. The room smelt of beer and chips and sweat and vinegar. There was a buzz of conversation. The next match was just about to begin. I found myself welcoming this alien atmosphere like an old friend.

I stood over them and Ange gave me a sad smile.

'Hello, Alan,' she said. 'This is Rob. He plays county cricket for . . . ' I can't remember which county she said. It doesn't matter. 'Rob, this is Alan. I was telling you about him.'

We shook hands. His handshake was firm, but well judged. I had known that it would be.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'Hello, Alan. Can I get you a drink?'

'No, thank you, Rob,' I said. 'I . . . er . . . ' I glanced at Ange. 'I don't think I'll be staying.'

'Same again, Ange?' he asked.

'Thanks, Rob.'

Off he went. Ange patted his seat to indicate that I should sit down. I did. She hadn't finished her drink, and Rob hadn't finished his, and I really do think that he left us alone out of tact, so that we could effect our closure. I'm glad now, and I was almost glad then, that she had found someone with such social grace.

The first thing to say is that I felt an enormous surge of relief and joy – yes, how odd, but I felt joy. She was as lovely as I had remembered. It had not been just an illusion of love. She had been worth knowing, and she was worth losing.

'I'm sorry, Alan,' she said, 'but I did warn you. Easy come, easy go, that's me.'

'That was you, you mean?'

'What?'

'You've found the one, haven't you?'

'Well . . . maybe. He is very nice.'

'I'm glad, Ange.'

'Do you mean that, Alan?'

'Almost.'

We had a little laugh, like an echo of all those laughs we had had. The laugh upset me a little, for a moment.

'Why didn't you get in touch?' I asked, trying to make it sound like a mere point of interest, not a rebuke.

'I'm sorry, Alan.' I didn't know what to say. This'll shock you, but I've never written a letter in my life.'

'I'm suitably shocked.'

There was a burst of cheering. One of the players in the next match was being introduced.

'I didn't want to phone. Phone calls can go wrong. You never gave me your e-mail address and you don't text. I didn't know how to do it. Besides, what could I say? There wasn't nuthink to say, was there? Not really.'

'No.'

'I'm sorry. I kept meaning to. Honest.'

I was vaguely aware that the match had begun, but Ange seemed totally unaware of it. We were so close to each other, as close as we had ever been, and, despite the pain, I relished every second of that closeness.

'I called at your house,' I said.

'You never!'

I told her about my conversation with her neighbour.

‘Old Tilly,’ she said. ‘She ain’t so bad, poor old gel. We was in Spain, Alan. Rob’s brother has a place there. He’s a footballer. We took Mum as well.’

‘So, he holds all the aces.’

I wished I hadn’t said that. I smiled to take the sting out of it.

‘Poor old Alan,’ she said.

‘Not so poor,’ I said. ‘I’ve got a year’s sabbatical.’

‘What’s that when it’s at home?’

‘A year’s paid leave.’

‘Alan! That’s great. How did you get that? Win it, did you?’

‘No, no. Lawrence arranged it for me. Thought I was exhausted.’

‘That’s rubbish. I could’ve told him that.’

She laughed, utterly unselfconsciously, a real Ange laugh, full of remembered sensuality. I flinched mentally, waiting for the pain, arming myself against it, but not as much pain came as I had expected. Suddenly I felt much calmer.

‘Well, unfortunately that isn’t the sort of criterion on which they judge such matters at the university, I’m afraid,’ I said.

‘So what’ll you do with your year’s thingummydoodle?’

‘I thought I might go on a cruise round the world.’

‘Round the world!’ she said. ‘That’s fantastic.’

‘Well, perhaps.’

‘You’ll meet all sorts of amazing women, rich widows, oriental princesses . . .’

‘Well, possibly.’

She leant across and gave me one of her brief kisses, like the early ones before we became close. That was a difficult moment, I admit. I had the sentimental thought, ‘I know it has to end, I accept the end, but oh, how I wish we were back at the beginning.’

‘How did you get in?’ she asked. ‘It’s a sell-out.’

‘I pleaded. I pretended to be Tons Thomas’s father.’

‘You never!’

‘I do a reasonably convincing Welsh accent.’

‘Alan!’

She gave me another quick kiss.

‘I hope you don’t mind me saying this,’ she said, ‘but you haven’t half improved since I met you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

I put my hand on hers, and squeezed it.

It was closure, as good as I could have dreamt under the

circumstances, but I am human, and there were two questions that I still needed to ask. The first one shows me not as a 55-year-old, but as an inexperienced man who has only recently lost his virginity. Forgive me for my vanity, if you can.

‘Those nights at the darts, Ange, and in Rome, were they . . .?’

‘They were great.’ She looked round and lowered her voice. ‘You were just as good as Rob.’

I felt absurdly pleased.

‘Alan, it wasn’t as simple as “easy come, easy go”. I stopped being that sort of girl when I met you. I grew up. I . . . I was frightened. You were too keen, know what I mean?’

‘You were frightened of the intensity.’

‘Yeah. I kept thinking . . . this is awful, Alan and I don’t like myself for it. I kept thinking of when I was thirty-nine, you’d be eighty.’

‘Well it is awful,’ I couldn’t resist saying, ‘because you’ve got the maths wrong. You’d have been *forty*-nine when I was eighty.’

‘Oh gawd. Sorry. I was never any good at maths.’

‘No, but, you were right, Ange. Better to end as we did now than be in a right old mess then.’

‘I’d like to have kids, Alan.’

‘And you didn’t want them to have an old father.’

She looked embarrassed. She couldn’t think of a reply.

‘I know you’d never have wanted kids,’ she said.

Had she not read my letter from Prague?

That led naturally on to the other question I had to ask. There was a burst of cheering. Half the room leapt up with cries of ‘One Hundred and Eighteeee.’ I had to wait.

‘Did you get a letter from me?’ I asked. ‘From Prague?’

‘Yeah, I did. I couldn’t read it. The writing was terrible. As if you was drunk or somethink. I mean I know you never would be, but that was how it looked. Or it was written by bluebottles. It was a list, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes. Yes, it was.’

‘I thought, “It’s philosophy. It’s a list of, I don’t know, theories and black holes and that.” I didn’t try very hard.’

‘It was a love letter.’

‘Oh. Sorry.’

‘The only love letter I ever wrote.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Probably the only love letter I ever will write.’

‘No! You’ll write lots now you’ve broken your duck.’

‘Maybe.’

‘I am sorry I didn’t read it, though, Alan.’

‘It doesn’t matter now. In fact it didn’t matter then.’

Rob returned with the drinks. I was grateful to him for having left us alone so long.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said. ‘They haven’t got enough staff on.’

I admired his finesse. I thought that there was a good chance that they would have really lovely children.

‘I must be off,’ I said, and I ventured a comment about our relationship in front of Rob. I was prepared to leave, I was even happy to leave, but I didn’t wish to slink out.

I leant over and kissed Ange for the last time, and said ‘Thank you for everything, Ange.’

‘Do you really mean that, Alan?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘It would all have been a waste of time if I didn’t. I really do think, you see, that in this cruel world we should be grateful for every nice thing that happens, and, when it’s over, we should know how to walk away without looking back.’

‘You’re a bit of a philosopher,’ said Rob.

‘Yes, well, you’ve got to be in my game,’ I said.

My eyes met Ange’s for the last time. We both smiled wryly, and then I did what I had said I should do. My father would have been proud of me. I walked away without looking back.

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